

**TELEVISIONS**

Volume 7, Numbers 2/3  
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ROBIN WILLIAMS

# ***sitcoms***

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Garry Marshall page 6

Families on TV page 10

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# TELEVISIONS

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## Volume 7, Numbers 2/3

- |  |  |
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| <p><b>2 Editors' Note on Reviewing</b></p> <p><b>5 Letter from WGBH, New Television Workshop</b></p> <p><b>6 The Sitcoms of Garry Marshall</b><br/>By Tim Patterson</p> <p><b>10 Families on TV, Looking for the Working Class</b><br/>By Lynda Glennon and Richard Butsch</p> <p><b>12 Live From the Kitchen</b><br/>By Lloyd Trufelman</p> <p><b>13 Bay Area Video Coalition's Western Exposure</b><br/>By Rebecca Moore</p> | <p><b>15 Videowest</b><br/>By Lloyd Trufelman</p> <p><b>16 Mobil Showcase Network</b><br/>By James Roman</p> <p><b>20 TV Delivers Consumers: Book Reviews</b><br/>By Walt Carroll</p> <p><b>23 White House Conference on Libraries</b><br/>By Gayle Gibbons</p> <p><b>24 3-2-1 Contact: Formative Research</b><br/>By Barbara Myerson Katz</p> <p><b>33 TV Acting: Is the BBC the Best?</b><br/>By James Hindman</p> <p><b>40 An Index to Televisions and The Community Video Report 1973-1979</b></p> |
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# Editors' note

In this issue we are taking a step we have been considering for some time. By in large, the stories we've collected here reflect our commitment to developing new models for video reviewing.

When *The Community Video Report* made the change in 1975 from a local newsletter to a national magazine, it was in response to a need expressed by our video friends for information from Washington including coverage of the FCC, the NCTA, the NEA, Congress, Public Television. There was a tremendous appreciation for the simple networking/information/clearinghouse service that we could supply. These services included reports on funding sources, the latest developments in government agencies and national associations, on the many conventions and conferences held here, interpretations of industry trends and hardware sales.

In the last few years the success of independents in producing work for public TV, the reemergence of cable, the promise of direct consumer marketing, and the phenomenal growth of private television systems in industry and government have spawned many organizational newsletters and advertising based magazines. Newsletters useful for video producers providing information on funding, exhibitions, new works, etc. include *The Independent* put out by the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers in NYC, *The Community Television Report* of the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers, the Bay Area Video Coalition's *Networks*, *The Animator* from Portland's Northwest Film Study Center. There are trade magazines such as *Video Systems* and *Videography* that are not only reporting on non-broadcast applications but are also doing a better and better job of evaluating equipment and facilities. There is a boom in consumer video magazines such as *WATCH* and *Home Video* that report on programming for sale and non-professional hardware. However, none of these periodicals is dedicated to the regular critical reviewing that is necessary to challenge producers and develop a sophisticated audience. In part, models for our new emphasis lie in film magazines such as *JumpCut*, *Cineaste*, *Film Quarterly*, *Sight and Sound*. Though, there is a new kind of reviewing that has to be fitted to video's specifics including the scale of video production (over 50,000 tapes in 1980), the experimental mixtures of dramatic and information formats for specialized audiences, the activated viewer with control over programming, electronic imagery, etc.

Of course there is a significant body of TV writing in this country. *TV Guide* is the largest selling magazine and every major paper has a

program reviewer and reports on ratings, broadcast industry trends and regularly ballyhoos the new technologies. This growing body of journalistic and academic TV reviewers reflect increasing audience interest in video uses and programming decisions.

*All In the Family: A Critical Appraisal* edited by Richard Adler is a compilation that provides the basis for an evaluation of the state of the art of TV criticism.

This book is part of a television criticism curriculum that is being developed by Adler and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Adler, former TV critic for the *L.A. Times*, chose *All In the Family* for this appraisal because, he explains, AITF was the most popular TV series in three decades; was controversial; and broke "new ground in entertainment programming."

The book is important for what it does and for what it leaves out. The book's eight sections include: three scripts from 1971, 1973, and 1978; critical reaction — the first and second season; audience research reports; critical reaction—later articles; seven days with *All In the Family*; the "real" Archie Bunker; and last, comments on the show's "meaning."

The three sections of reviews are the core of the book. Following the evolution of reviews, you can examine the quality of television criticism in this country. After reading a few reviews, *deja-vu* sets in. The same words, point of view, and anecdotes keep occurring and not in a way that provides the reader any perspective or illumination about any particular episode. Over and over you read: loveable bigot, weapon of laughter, entertaining and provocative, pioneering, significant, incisive and audacious.

There are several articles debating whether bigotry is funny or if it is possible to have a loveable bigot, including an exchange between author Laura Hobson and Norman Lear, creator of the series. The arguments of the "bigotry is not funny" camp are more thoughtful and connected and put the issue of bigotry in it's historical context. The "loveable bigot" assertions claim the positive shock value of people facing their prejudices, the "weapon of laughter" in combatting bigotry, and a sort of therapy-wise, 70's sophistication that believes that AITF is really dealing with the issues. You get the sense, particularly from Norman Lear that he is somehow more honest, more liberal because he can laugh at bigotry. Implicit in the argument is that although it makes you laugh it also makes you think. Ben Demott sums up the entire debate when he describes it as one of "much ferocity and zero illumination."



The model review in the book is by Michael Arlen, writer for *The New Yorker*, titled, "The Media Dramas of Norman Lear." Though Arlen discusses all of the Norman Lear productions, *The Jeffersons*, *Maude*, etc., his analysis is essential in understanding *All In the Family*. He credits Norman Lear with the "feel for what the public wants before it knows it and the ability to deliver it." Arlen says Lear's dramas don't depend "on jokes, funny stories or family but on the new contemporary consciousness of media." Through TV, endless quantities of undifferentiated information are dispensed daily: Vietnam, pop psychology, abortion, the boat people and the earnest topics uncovered in *60 Minutes* are all part of our collective media mind. Lear was the first to exploit this topicality for titillating entertainment and controversial laughs. Though "sensitive" issues are brought up — impotence, menopause, unemployment, homosexuality, communism, the program's surface awareness of the topics primarily adds to the audiences' media vocabulary. The roots of the *All In the Family* model can be seen reflected in other programs that deal with the same issues — *Donohue* and the talk shows, *60 Minutes* and the news magazines, and the various movies of the week on rape, child abuse etc.

The recent national cover-story success of *Donahue* illuminates the viewer urge for participation that underlies so much of what sells on TV. This marketable unexpressed demand has been heightened by the expectations for the new media, control over viewing patterns, wider choice range, etc. The mass of viewers respond to talk shows in which they can imagine themselves participating, engaged in subjects which are *their* subjects, those concerned with family, sexual fears, employment, popular culture, and doing good. The talk shows' empty conversational rhythms are mirrored in the reduction of news subjects to pastimes. In a 1976 interview Erik Barnouw pessimistically saw "an illusion of wide participation by people in TV, but it is easily controlled."

After the episode on *All In the Family* where Edith discovered a lump on her breast — thousands of women were motivated to contact their local American Cancer Society. This illustrates the positive effect this kind of topicality can have but also shows its weakness. Cancer is a good example. The American Cancer Society has for years been advertising that the cure for cancer was just around the corner — focusing on curative as opposed to preventive solutions. AITF doesn't want to deal with the causes of cancer — just like the American Cancer Society. (Smoking is not the big cause of cancer, environmental and workplace pollutants are). Rob Reiner exemplifies this surface political and social argument with his easily denigrated vocabulary of activism and involvement.

In his latest series, *The Baxters*, Norman Lear has taken this exploitation of our needs a step further. The first 12 minutes of *The Baxters* is a problem play produced in an industrial-soap-style using a middle-class family setting to raise topical issues for discussion. For the final 12 minutes the show switches back to a live local studio or call-in audience who comment and discuss on what they've just seen. In most markets, individual discussion is kept quite brief, allowing for a maximum number of participants and little chance of anyone getting too serious.

Archie Bunker/Carroll O'Connor is the star of *All In the Family* and more attention needs to be paid to his portrayal of the loveable bigot and how his characterization of Archie has evolved. A detailed analysis is necessary to understand how the character's attractiveness is maintained for a viewer serious about the topic. Character development in a sit-com is secondary to the primary purpose which is to entertain and amuse. The sit-com performance is broad and frontal. The actors react to the situation, with little interaction between themselves. Most situation comedies to be effective are done before a live audience or at least one that is simulated with an added laugh track. The viewer then becomes part of the scene — cued to what's funny and when to laugh. We laughed so easily at Lucy when she acted goofy and dumb precisely because we knew she wasn't; in the same way many of us laugh at Archie's bigotry because we know that Carroll O'Connor is a liberal like Norman Lear.

Arlen argues that what sets off all of the Norman Lear comedies is anger used as a joke. In early episodes of *All In the Family*, Archie would rage at a particular issue — blacks moving into the neighborhood, inflation or his boss, but in later episodes his anger becomes more and more random and simply incorporated into his characterization. Archie blows up to be funny — nothing is really resolved or released — the anger just dissipates.

The research section of the book is not easy to read. Audience/program evaluators have a different vocabulary and are cautious about interpreting the meaning of their research. The research to date about *All In the Family* is not conclusive, but results for several of the studies are explained along with the methods and instruments used to measure audience response to the program. The studies did find some evidence for the following: It is more likely that *All In the Family* was reinforcing prejudice and racism than combatting it. (This contradicts what Norman Lear has asserted over and over, that the program "has not served to strengthen the attitudes of viewers who held Archie's prejudices.") Not all viewers have responded to the program and its characters in the same way (the selective-perception theory).

This last statement though it seems obvious

**The critic must learn to speak of television as if it were part not only of a world of facts and measurements but of a larger, changing world of untold possibilities not the least of which would be for it to truly serve its audience. In other words he should speak of television as if it mattered.**

**— Michael Arlen**



**There is a need for a new kind of television critic...to stimulate us into deciding what kind of electronic community we want to live in...**

**—Kas Kalba**

has important implications. AITF's target audience is the adult viewer...but millions of children have viewed the program weekly and in measuring the viewer effects of AITF, researchers found that children were interpreting the program much differently, and in some cases missed the point of the program entirely. Will the stereotypes that AITF satirizes be understood by kids or will they believe what they see? Archie's anger and venom may be shown to have more violent implications than Bugs Bunny (also aimed at adults, but sold for kids; at least it doesn't pretend to reality.)

One section of the book is titled the "real" Archie Bunker. An excellent idea that just doesn't quite work; this section includes some profiles, a family in Queens, and Klamath Falls, Oregon. Though the surface details are 'correct,' i.e., a conservative mom & pop grocery store owner and his liberal live-in son, you do not get more than a surface idea of what they think about. They could have gone further.

Finally there is a section in the book on the "meaning of *All In the Family* consisting of excerpts from a symposium. The people chosen to comment on the significance of *All In the Family* were TV critics, TV industry leaders, and some of the actors, writers and producers directly involved with the actual AITF production (Norman Lear, Bud Yorkin, Sally Struthers, etc.) They tell us little except that again they all think it was an important and significant show. This kind of forum could have been revealing, but it isn't. The question is too broad and general. It lends itself to lots of backpatting.

There are a number of discussions missing from the book that would have been useful in developing a more energetic appraisal. There is no attempt at any class-analysis. There is little discussion about what it means to portray a working-class family on television. We never see Archie working or really talking about work that much. What does it mean that Archie has now "moved up" to become a businessman, owner of a small bar. Certainly the image of the small businessman, petty bourgeois is glorified in some of the other Norman Lear sit-coms (*Sanford and Son* and *The Jeffersons*).

A comparison of *All In the Family* and *Till Death Do Us Part*, the British program it's based on would have been useful on a number of levels. Both feature a conservative, working class man, but in the English version he is proud to be a member of the working-class — unlike Archie who is struggling to get out of it. Continuing the comparison, it would be useful to look at the role of politics in the two shows. In *All In the Family*, political exchanges are pared down to Archie's throw away lines and Meathead's responses.

Our contributors this issue are attempting to go beyond the superficial treatments charac-

terized by the majority of these mainly moral reviews, by placing programming within its TV context historically, its social context, and by analyzing production techniques more rigorously. Patterson's article on Garry Marshall's sitcoms relates their success to the 'me-decade' ideology, and the Glennon and Butch article, "The Working Class on TV," orients the Bunker show in a history of family comedies. Hindman's BBC vs. American performance article is a start at analyzing the specific techniques of television acting. TV reviewers generally deal with theme and audience response and they have not in the manner of their film counterparts picked up a vocabulary of production references. There is virtually no writer who appreciates innovative technical solutions to problems in performance, art direction, script construction, editing or engineering. We are trying to develop a body of writers who are working professionals in these fields.

The most promising sources for new television writing are not necessarily limited to the ranks of professional writers, though there are several working journalists (Gottlieb, DeMartino, Patterson) whom we count on to put programs both in their social and industry contexts.

There are also insider stories that few journalists are prepared to detail as well as the staff person who has worked on the project from the beginning. The loss of objectivity is more than compensated for by insights accumulated throughout the production process. (See Katz, on *Contact* 3-2-1).

In many cases there are also content specialists who can review a program in their subject area and provide our readers with a better understanding of the difficulties of translating a subject for TV. (i.e. midwife reviews birthing tapes; teacher reviews science series; physician reviews medical applications of new distribution technologies.)

We are also working with academics who follow television issues from the perspective of their disciplines—sociology, history, communication, and literature.

TV is too important a presence in our lives to leave its analysis to the limited spectrum presented in Adler's book. There are no TV reviewers, yet. Adler's book is a start and worth reading. But, TV reviewing is a battle of ideas that has to mobilize armies. What is at stake is everyday life.

—Larry Kirkman  
Gayle Gibbons



# Readers Reply

To the Editors of Televisions:

We have recently received and read *Televisions*, Volume 6, No. 4 — "Independent Producers in Public TV" by Mr. DeMartino. It is an impressive and stimulating document in its historical scope, in the breadth and depth of its research, and in its far-reaching suggestions and recommendations.

In response to your invitation for replies to Mr. DeMartino's paper, we should like to do so. There are two issues in the article which we should like to address, one specific and the other, generic.

In the major section, *The Record*, under the subsection "The Experimental Centres:" Mr. DeMartino states, "The TV Lab is the only fully functioning operation remaining ..." We must point out that the WGBH New Television Workshop also remains a fully functioning operation. It has just commenced its sixth year as a formal entity, funded by a core support grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and additional money anticipated from the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Massachusetts Council on the Arts. Our principal mandate continues to be the creation of collaborative situations between Artists from the disciplines of Drama, Dance and the Visual Arts (including Videoartists) and the Workshop, in an effort to further explore and experiment with television as an artistic medium.

Our major activities include *Frames of Reference*; the *Artists' Showcase*; and *Artists on Artists*. *Frames of Reference* is a series which we plan to co-produce with various other stations in the PBS system. The staff of the Workshop, in association with various collaborating producers, technicians and facilities, will be inviting and working with selected regional artists to create new works for television. The best of these will be organized in various contexts and formats, into half-hour programs, which will be offered to PBS for national release, under the series title *Frames of Reference*. This is a concentrated effort to reach a broadcast audience, on a regular basis, with Artists' works, in an accessible framework, which will be something more than a showcase. We are also hopeful that these co-productions will have an "apple-seed" effect, by encouraging other stations to continue working with their particular regional artists.

The *Artists' Showcase* is one of the longest running series of its kind on Public Television. In October of 1976, Sunday night at the end of regularly scheduled broadcasting, the air time became the province of Artists, both from the Workshop and elsewhere. Each week an artist's work is broadcast, locally, in its entirety. We are planning to add more new independent works this year, to the schedule, provide modest local rights payments, and produce a series of brief introductions by a host, for each program.

*Artists on Artists* is a new Workshop project which has received funding from PBS and from WGBH. We will be commissioning ten media artists to each produce a ninety second piece on another artist. These ten pieces will be offered to PBS to be used as filler material, on the system, as the need occurs. If these are successful and prove appealing to the system, the Workshop would prepare a proposal for major funding to continue the project on a regular basis.

The sum of all these efforts represents, we believe, a significant and dedicated commitment to working with independents, by an organization which is very much still "fully functioning."

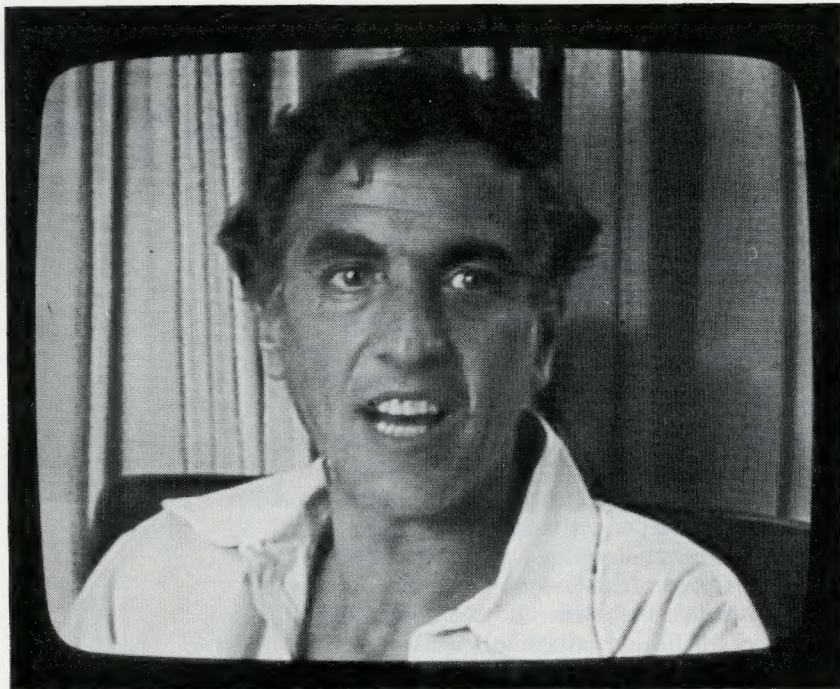
The generic issue we would like to take up concerns the various structures proposed by Mr. DeMartino, which might govern the relationship between the Independents and Public Television. As a statement of position, we are eager for and welcome the participation of these individuals and groups in the system and realize the basic need they will fill and extensive benefits they will bring. It is *critical*, however, that whatever mechanisms are created for cooperation between these two forces, be meticulously, carefully and thoughtfully generated. Much of the history of Public Broadcasting is filled with brave, innovative attempts to fulfill its various unique mandates, under several notably less-than-successful organizational arrangements. It is our heartfelt and experienced opinion that the most successful means of effective communication between the Independents and the Broadcasters must be *direct*. Creating yet another bureaucracy, the "Centre for Independent Television," to be integrated into the present, appallingly-confused maze of administrative superstructures that have been formed in Public Television, seems unnecessary and possibly detrimental to the task at hand. Removing Independents from open exchange with the system's producers and staffs, and channeling their ideas, concerns and projects through such a centre, will simply isolate them. Artists must be invited and encouraged to submit proposals, concepts, finished or unfinished works to the stations themselves, who must be encouraged to be receptive. Only in this way can exciting, creative, positive relationships be fostered and given opportunities to grow.

We have had a long history in working with Independents, on this basis, and we are convinced that it has worked, here, and with concern and effort can work elsewhere.

Sincerely yours,

Fred Barzyk, Producer/Director  
Olivia Tappan, Associate Producer  
Dorothy Chiesa, Visual Arts Coordinator  
Nancy Mason, Dance Coordinator  
of the WGBH New Television Workshop





"Garry, you do a strange kind of work.  
But I do it very, very good.  
That's what I enjoy."  
Garry Marshall on Garry Marshall.

## "Keep Your Center Smooth" The Sitcoms of Garry Marshall

By Tim Patterson

The unrelenting sameness of prime-time commercial television sometimes obscures the processes of incremental change through which the formulas adapt themselves to changes in social reality. A minor, symbolic skirmish in this battle for the hearts, minds and disposable income of viewers is currently being played out Sunday nights at 8 o'clock, with *Mork and Mindy* going head-to-head against *Archie Bunker's Place*.

In the early season ratings, it's a standoff. But whatever the outcome of this particular confrontation, the war is over. Garry Marshall, producer of *Mork*, *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley*, has clearly established himself as the wave of the future, thereby bestowing on Norman Lear, the producer of *All In the Family*, *Mary Hartman*, *The Jeffersons* and similar hits from recent years, the dubious status of wave-of-the-future emeritus. The significance of this transition between two of the most dominant figures in television can only be hinted at by the measurement of Nielsen points, which are merely the body count in a conflict that is ultimately ideological.

Garry Marshall is hot. The trio of shows which bear his imprint consistently scored in the top five among all networks shows last season, and it is a safe bet that all three will remain near the top once the 79-80 season gets past the

September-October stunting and settles down for the long haul. *Mork* turns a weekly profit estimated at \$700,000, a figure not likely to be dented by star Robin Williams' recent raise to \$75,000 an episode. The syndicated rights to *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley* have commanded record prices on the auction block, with their long-term profit trajectory headed for the vicinity of \$400 million.

All this has made Garry Marshall a household world, and not just in Households Using Television. In fact, it may be time to admit that it was probably Garry Marshall, not Fred Silverman, who hoisted ABC to its leading position among the three networks. Last season, CBS and NBC simply pulled their own plugs on Tuesday night in the face of the "murderer's row" of *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley*, and *Mork* somewhat unexpectedly took Thursday night away from *The Waltons* in their declining years. This season, ABC is pressing its advantage by using *Happy Days* to anchor Tuesday, *Laverne and Shirley* to retain Thursday, and *Mork* to drive a wedge into CBS' traditional Sunday night hegemony. Four or five years ago, the attempt to dislodge Archie Bunker was unthinkable, and ABC's strategy of trying to topple the lovable bigot with its cuddly adolescent from outer space still smacks of *nouveau riche* chutzpah. But lest we forget, the *nouveaux* are indeed *riches*. And so far, Silverman's supertrain



at NBC has never quite gotten on track.

Marshall's success in drawing huge audiences is a result of simultaneously tapping three crucial, distinct sub-audiences: the very young, the fairly hip, and the solidly parental. As he explained in *Sitcom: The Adventures of Garry Marshall*, recently aired on PBS, this audience coalition is achieved by building different appeals into the same show: slapstick and silliness for the kids, hip humor and trendy references for those who usually keep TV at a distance because of its squareness, and wholesome tags and messages for parents concerned that the drift toward sex and violence in programming makes most TV not square enough, especially for their children. Score with only one of these audiences and your new show dies in October; score with two out of three and you may limp through a season or two in a good time slot; score with all three and even your friends have to admit that you "do it very, very good."

Which Garry Marshall certainly does. The trick is not simply including all these elements, but combining them in a way that gives a show its distinctive identity and keeps all three audiences responding at their own levels throughout each half-hour and each season. Executing the package also demands recognition of the fact that people only half-watch TV, with other things on their minds or in their living rooms competing for interest; in other words, "you have to get their attention." Which Garry Marshall certainly does.

*Mork and Mindy* is the most finished example of this approach, positively state of the art. Whereas Marshall's other shows rely on multiple characters to achieve the multiple impact, Mork's extraterrestiality allows him to synthesize the extremes in a way no mere earthling could. The first season was especially strong on nonsense and pratfalls: galactic gobbledygook ("na-nu, na-nu!"), drinking water through his finger, sleeping by curling up head-first over the back of a couch, misunderstanding the meaning of every object in sight, 180-degree reversals of affect, falling down. Lots of falling down. In fact, there seems to be an unwritten production quota of at least one "Mork-crashes-to-the-floor" interlude per show, usually entangled with one or more members of the supporting cast.

The new season seems to have upped the ante on the second quality — hipness — perhaps in order to draw more young adults away from *Archie Bunker's Place*. The last few weeks have been littered with puns and throwaway references to Cuisinarts, to old TV shows no 12-year old could ever have watched, and to the living legacy of Earl Butz. Such excursions into hip humor generally come in 3-second pulses, never lasting long enough to befuddle the other audiences. Marshall describes the show as *Saturday Night Live* at 8:00; and, one might add, every two



photos by Gail Bernstein

**Marshall and his Stable of Stars. Publicity for PBS Documentary, *Sitcom*.**

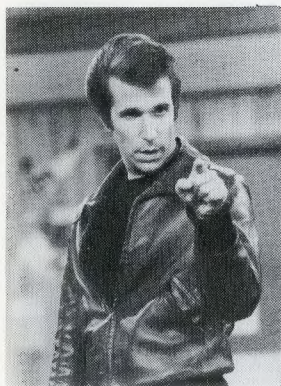
minutes or so thereafter.

The deal is cemented with moral platitudes. Each show ends with Mork making a report back to headquarters on Ork, the substance of which is always some truth Mork has discovered about himself or about getting along with others on this peculiar planet. But the tag segments simply cap off the basic format of the "plot" of each show, which always revolves around Mork learning a new emotion (apparently not a burden Orkians have to live with), trying it on for size, going outrageously overboard with it, and finally integrating it into his life. Mork's goal is a kind of cosmic assimilation, which provides weekly opportunities to reaffirm the obvious — the need to "feel useful," the importance of "being close to someone," to cite two examples from October. The zany space cadet, for all his inappropriate behavior, is finally revealed as Ann Landers in baggy pants.

The same combination of appeals, writ small, pervades *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley*. Silliness is rampant. When in doubt, go for the belly laugh, in which case the home audience will be prompted by the shrieks of the studio audience present for the filming. It would seem that Milwaukee is the costume party capital of the world; the shows rely on outlandish get-ups the way Mork relies on falling down.

While neither of these two older shows is as overtly hip as *Mork and Mindy*, they are both certainly hip for Milwaukee ca. 1960. More striking is the clean-cut conventionality of the major





characters. Richie Cunningham (Ron Howard) of *Happy Days* doesn't even wear baggy pants. His warm relationship with his parents is straight out of *Father Knows Best*, and despite his occasional attraction to some fleeting, morally questionable passion, he always returns to Lori Beth, the next best thing to the girl next door. (Played, remarkably, by Linda Goodfriend!) The Fonz (Henry Winkler) is the perfect foil, combining some mildly amoral mannerisms (which have made him a cult hero among pre-teens) with a core of basic decency (which neutralizes any threat he might pose to parental sensitivity about role models). And Laverne and Shirley never exploit their independence from their families for any prurient purposes. Considering all the potentially hot-blooded young people in Marshall's shows, and the inviting living arrangements (not only Laverne and Shirley's relative freedom, but Mork and Mindy's flagrant cohabitation), the degree of desexualization serves to differentiate these shows sharply from most other sit-coms launched in the past five years.

Superficially at least, Marshall's contribution might appear to be the defense of the "old" values against the assaultive hedonism of, say, *Three's Company* — or, for that matter, of *Charlie's Angels*. This is accurate, but only half the story. The conventionality of tradition is an effective overlay on a deeper stratum of militantly contemporary values — themselves the new conventions of the "me generation." In the end, the Cuisinart jokes are peripheral to the central quest for self-identity. The real thrust of Garry Marshall's comedies is not the rebirth of pie-in-the-face, nor the translation of *Saturday Night Live* into the family hour, nor the legitimization of yesterday's orthodoxy. It is rather, the selling of the "me decade" to a mass audience. What Robin Williams offered as a statement of his personal philosophy to *People* magazine (which is where one reads such things these days) could also serve as a motto for Mork himself: "You've got to keep your center smooth."

In order to see this more clearly, it helps to return to the confrontation between Mork and Archie Bunker, and between Garry Marshall and Norman Lear. Lear's string of situation comedies in the early 1970s were heralded as breakthroughs in prime-time TV; they were controversial, they were extremely popular, they had a definite ripple effect on other sit-coms, and they did for CBS (where most of them aired) what Marshall later did for ABC. Lear was hailed for making comedy serious: creating characters that were many-sided, giving prominence to minorities, women, and the working class, injecting contemporary political and social issues for explicit discussion, translating the radical political ferment of the 60's into popular satire for the 70's.

Naturally, Lear's iconoclasm was exaggerated

at the time, inflated into the belief (or the charge) that his were radical critiques. The humorous/serious presentation of ethnic and racial identities and conflicts, for example was seen as a "liberating" recognition of social turmoil; critics somehow neglected to note that this kind of ethnic humor had been a staple of American popular entertainments from the mid-nineteenth century on, through the minstrel show, vaudeville, burlesque, the "golden age" of radio and even the initial years of TV (Amos and Andy, Molly Goldberg, etc.). But compared to the competition of the moment, the admission of the existence of racism — and male chauvinism, abortion, drug use, opposition to the war in Vietnam, variations in sexual preference — was a significant step forward. Lear's shows were hardly socialist realism, nor even the cutting edge of the counter-culture, but then again, they were certainly not *Donna Reed*.

If Norman Lear was, in this limited way, the vanguard of social change, Garry Marshall is a throwback, and, in many ways, consciously so. Most obviously, the choice of settings is an explicit turn away from today's headlines as the subject for examination. The 1960 peg on which *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley* are hung is a very wise, and a very insidious choice. It is neither fish nor fowl, neither 1950s nor 1960s. No Cold War, no Joe McCarthy, no Montgomery bus boycott; no March on Washington, no Cuban missile crisis, no Bull Connor, no draft resistance, no SDS, no Watts.

Even in the purely cultural realm, it is the era of the aerosol-spray music of Fabian, Frankie Avalon and Paul Anka, not the hard-edged rock and roll of Chuck Berry or the early Elvis, not the proto-psychedelic invasion of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. The character of the Fonz is also sacrificed to this time warp; a figure who might embody some of the primitive aggression of the young hoods in *The Wild One* or *Rebel Without a Cause* is reduced to the trappings of a leather jacket and ducktail. In the world Marshall has constructed, there is no room for conflict except of the most trivial kind.

It is a moment suspended in time in which the obliteration of any political reference retains a minimum plausibility. It is essential to realize that this is Garry Marshall's artificial world, not, in fact, Milwaukee 1960. Not only is there no civil rights movement; there are no Black people at all in three of the whitest shows on television. There is no pretense of accurate historical reconstruction, once the premise of retreating two decades is established. *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley* are riddled with anachronisms, in the form of references or situations that belong five years earlier or twenty years later. Laverne and Shirley's financial and domestic independence from their families is a central example. *Mork and*



*Mindy* again perfects the conventions of Marshall's style; the setting is essentially timeless.

Having factored out any obtrusions of historical, social, and political reality, Marshall and the writers are free to stick in anything they want, unfettered by the constraints not only of the 70s, but of the 60s and 50s as well. (Within limits, of course: *The Adventures of Garry Marshall* included some delicious moments in which one line from *Mork* about oil company profiteering was endlessly rewritten under a mandate from the network censors.) While Norman Lear thrived on the topical reference and the pressing controversy, Marshall has rendered them irrelevant.

Lear's characters, even at their most cardboard, were social types: Archie, the lower-middle-class bigot; Maude, the militantly feminist matron; George Jefferson, the hustling Black businessman; Mary Hartmann, the mad housewife. Marshall's characters are ultimately personality types. This is part of the genius of the Fonz and Mork as lead characters; they can be entirely self-defining, providing their own inner logic. The defining characteristic of the Fonz is omnipotence, and that of Mork is outer space-ness. This gives each of them more ways to get a laugh or make a point than any historically determined character could hope for, and it gives free reign to their considerable performing talents.

Most of the entire roster of characters have a somewhat magical quality, actually. Most have no visible means of support and, consequently, no worries about money. (Laverne and Shirley are only partial exceptions to this rule; their jobs at the brewery have ceased to play much of a role in the show, and the plots rarely evolve around any economic question.) There is no inflation, no crime, no radiation hazards, no unnecessary surgery — nothing that would permit a social force or phenomenon to define their situation and thus define them.

So, what do these characters do with themselves in this de-historicized world? Primarily, of course, they act silly; these are, after all, commercial TV sit-coms in which delivering an audience by "getting their attention" is what enables advertisers to deliver the goods. Generally, however, acting silly occurs in the pursuit of having fun. Unlike *Three's Company* or Stockard Channing's crew of California trendies in last season's *Just Friends*, Marshall's characters do not fight for the right to be hedonists; they simply are kept busy having fun. Milwaukee 1960 is one long round of dates, frat parties, funny vacations and whimsical wild goose chases. This is effectively an adolescent version of the program of the "me decade" of self-indulgence, without the propaganda.

What matters is direct experience, not mediated, through institutions, authority figures or collective wisdom. It is perhaps telling that

Mork carries on his investigation of the planet Earth entirely through hanging out with Mindy and a few other pals, never bothering to consult the printed word. Again, Marshall's figures do not issue manifestos about the virtues of immediate experience; they have internalized that orientation so thoroughly that no alternative ever occurs to them.

The problems encountered on the road of life are, therefore, purely personal. True, this is not exactly unprecedented in the history of sit-coms; after all, when Maude had her abortion it was indeed *her* abortion. But that personal trauma was by definition a social concern; when Richie Cunningham gets frustrated by having to wear a Humpty-Dumpty suit, no broader issues are triggered.

What is learned by surviving these mini-conflicts is not a new perspective on larger developments, but simply a new insight into the inner self. This is the formula of Mork's sermonettes: Mork starts out lacking a particular emotion (being close); he stumbles into having it; he decides it makes him feel better; and he wraps up the show by proclaiming its universal applicability ("being close to someone is important"). In less clearly labelled ways, *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley* make the same kinds of points week after week. The method of generating truisms utilizes the same inductive fallacy—"if it works for me, it must be true for everybody"—that powers the philosophical engine of the "me decade" and its celebration of pop psychology.

Thus the value structure of Garry Marshall's shows is simultaneously a retreat into the apoliticality of the late 1950s and the personalistic sensibility of the late 1970s. The tags and messages which endear the shows to parents seem to reinforce traditional values, but their more important function is to make legitimate the cultivation of the self and the goal of self-improvement. While this is in part a return to *Father Knows Best*, the emphasis is not on the merits of hard work, good citizenship and so on which TV packaged twenty years ago. It is more likely to be on the merits of emotional intensity, of being in touch with your feelings, and of strengthening the self. The significance of all this is not so much in its partial parallel with older situation comedies, but in its correspondence with the general cultural glorification of self-absorption.

To stretch a previous metaphor beyond repair, Mork is ultimately Eric Berne masquerading as Ann Landers in baggy pants.

"I'm O.K., you're O.K. Na-nu, na-nu!"

*Tim Patterson has written on a variety of popular culture subjects for Science and Society, The Journal of Country Music, the Guardian and JUMPCUT. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*









# Families on TV: Where was the Working-Class?

By Richard Butsch and Lynda M. Glennon

Invariably, arguments with his son-in-law, Michael, end with Archie Bunker mispronouncing a word and making a fool of himself. In the 1950's and in reruns today, Chester Riley looks into the camera and wimpers when he gets himself into another "révoltin' development." Why are working class men portrayed in such degrading ways on television? What does it mean?

In trying to convey to non-working class students what working class lifestyle is like, what it means to live a working class life, we discovered that television family series were one of the rare examples in their experience that we could point to as illustration. As the primary and pervasive source of imagery about the working class, television portrayals have significant potential for affecting class consciousness. Yet there had been no studies of the portrayal of the working class on television beyond noting their absence.

Struck by the significance of this, we began in 1975 to systematically study the characterization of the working class on television. We chose family series as the genre to focus on because it provided the most complete treatment of family life and therefore social class lifestyle, and because such series have always been a mainstay of prime time network programming, appealing to a broad audience of all ages, sexes, and classes. The study has since grown beyond its initial bounds. We viewed more than 500 episodes of more than 30 series, including *All in the Family*, *Good Times*, *Family*, *The Waltons*, *One Day at a Time*, *Happy Days*, as well as reruns of such classics as *The Honeymooners*, *Life of Riley*, *The Flintstones*, *The Brady Bunch*, *I Love Lucy*, and *Father Knows Best*. In addition to commercial broadcasts we utilized the film collections of the Library of Congress and the Museum of Broadcasting (New York City).

Besides viewing numerous episodes we also compiled a complete list of all family series on prime time network television from 1947 to 1977. We did this with the help of the Television Information Offices of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), the research offices of the three commercial networks, and the Lincoln Center Theatre Arts Collection. Only 11 of more than 200 series portrayed working class families in the 30-year history of network television. By contrast, we identified 160 series as middle class,

including 22 families headed by lawyers alone. Professionals accounted for more than 40% of the heads of household of all series, and are invariably portrayed as successful.

Of the 11 working class series, six have appeared since 1971, starting with and apparently inspired by the great success of Norman Lear's *All in the Family*. Four appeared in the 1950's including the classics *Life of Riley*, *The Honeymooners*, and *I Remember Mama*. The sole working class series in the 1960's was *The Flintstones* (from 1960 to 1966), a cartoon which was heavily indebted to *Riley* and *The Honeymooners* for characterization and even particular plots.

One of the most striking and consistent characterizations we found in these working class series portrayed the husband-father as a bumbling fool with little dignity, often lovable but obviously unintelligent. In these shows the working class man is the butt of humor, often cast opposite a more sensible, mature wife.

An example of this is Fred of *The Flintstones*. *The Flintstones* is a Hanna-Barbera cartoon televised during prime time in the early 1960's. The cast consisted of Fred, his wife Wilma, and their neighbors Barney and Betty. Later a baby daughter was added. The show unashamedly borrowed and even copied from *The Honeymooners* and *The Life of Riley*.

Like Ralph Kramden, of *The Honeymooners*, Fred Flintstone is a loudmouth, dominates his friend Barney, and has an unending number of schemes. But unlike Ralph, he is more likeable, less angry, and cute in a pudgy sort of way. Wilma is tolerant of and even amused by Fred's antics. She treats Fred as a overgrown child! Wilma and Barney's wife Betty are amused because their security is never seriously threatened by his antics. Economically they live comfortably. But more important, Wilma consistently intervenes to prevent disaster. She acts as a safety net for Fred. She typically is one step ahead of Fred, even though he thinks he is pulling the wool over her eyes. So when disaster appears imminent she is there to save the day. In effect, Wilma is the "mommy" the infantile Fred can depend on to protect him from any danger.

This mother-child treatment takes on greater significance when we note that Wilma is characterized as middle class. Wilma is more reminiscent of Donna Reed than of a working class

**Only 11 out of more than 200 series portrayed working class families in the 30 year history of network television**



housewife. While she is always well dressed with her hair done and necklace and earrings, Fred has a perennial two-day growth of beard. It is the middle class playing mother to the working class child.

*The Flintstones* represent a remarkable paternalistic attitude toward the working class male. He is a child to be taken care of — and being a child must be told what to do. Just as the mother directs the child so should middle class professionals and managers direct the work of the working class.

This characterization is not a quirk of a few shows. It is consistent throughout the genre over the 30 year history of network television. The weak husband was central to the story line of *Mama* and *The Life of Riley*. This image has been softened in the 1970's but is still present in *All in the Family* and *Good Times*.

Archie Bunker — formerly a worker on a loading platform, now the owner-operator of a bar — is also portrayed as a loud-mouthed bungler, of limited competence and intelligence. In the 1950's Ralph Kramden and Chester Riley invariably got involved in some hairbrained scheme. In the 1960's it was Fred Flintstone. In the 1970's Archie invested the family savings in get-rich-quick schemes. The consistency of this characterization is undeniable.

With *All in the Family*, the connection of incompetence to class is strengthened by the contrast between Archie and his son-in-law Michael. Michael is a college student and later a college instructor. Archie's ignorance and foolishness are contrasted to his middle class son-in-law's reasonableness and intelligence.

The equation of competence and social class is completed by the portrayals of the middle class. There are also middle class family series which utilize buffoonery as a source of humor — but

with an interesting reversal. It is the wife, not the husband, who is the buffoon in *I Married Joan*, *Wendy and Me*, *Debbie Reynolds*, *Green Acres*, and *Happy Days*.

The predominant formula for middle class series has been that of superparents. Superparents appear in 12 of the 13 longest running middle class series from 1949 to 1971: *One Man's Family*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Make Room for Daddy*, *Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *Bachelor Father*, *Donna Reed*, *Doris Day*, *My Three Sons*, *Hazel*, *Family Affair*, and *The Brady Bunch*.

For a brief period during the mid 1970's, there appeared some series which poked fun at professionals: *The Bob Newhart Show* and *Maude* for example. But more recently these shows have disappeared and once again the middle class superparent has reappeared in *Family*, a much more sophisticated version of the superparent, and *Eight is Enough*.

The effect of these portrayals is to legitimate the class structure in the U.S. The mythology of the family series presents an image of the middle class man as mature, reasonable, intelligent, and masters of their own fate, and of the working class man as incapable of coping with everyday life. Such characterization legitimates relations at the workplace between middle class managers and professionals who direct work and workers who must obey orders. It helps to engender antagonism between the working class and middle class and encourages identification of the middle class with the existing system, since their sense of self-worth is bound up with their position within it.

Sociologists Lynda M. Glennon at Rutgers and Richard J. Butsch at Rider College are preparing a book on this subject.

## Live at the Kitchen

By Lloyd Trufelman

This fall, New York's major alternative performance space, The Kitchen Center for Video, Music and Dance, in collaboration with WGBY-TV (Springfield, Mass.) will produce the first "Live at the Kitchen" broadcast over PBS.

The series' first presentation will be Robert Ashley's opera, "Perfect Lives", a work for three solo voices and solo piano synchronized with pre-recorded arrangements for orchestra and chorus.





The performance is, according to the Kitchen's prospectus, specially designed as seven, half-hour programs for television and NPR radio simulcast produced in front of an audience at the Kitchen.

The project director for "Live at the Kitchen," Carlota Schoolman, says currently there are 15 PBS affiliates that have expressed an interest in presenting the program. She is looking for more affiliates, as well as other television organizations (broadcast or cable) to help "build a network" for those interested in the presentation of new music. Music centers, museums, performance spaces and video centers are also being queried.

"When this is scheduled," Schoolman says, "We're hoping for more "Live From the Kitchen" programs. Since Lincoln Center is not doing 20th Century works, we're trying to set up an outlet for contemporary production and new music."

The term "New Music" is a label of convenience given to an entire spectrum of current musical activity taking place here and abroad and was best exhibited at the Kitchen's "New Music, New York" festival last June.

The 10-day event featured nightly performances by 53 composers ranging from Philip Glass to Laurie Anderson, from Don Cherry to a lecture by Brian Eno.

Ashley, who performed his infamous "Wolfman" at the festival, has been a major figure on the contemporary music scene since the early 60's, when he co-organized the ONCE festivals in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Since 1969, Ashley has been the director of the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College in Oakland. In addition to his composing, he is also a senior research fellow at Brooklyn College's Institute for Studies in New American Music in New York.

He became involved with TV in 1976 with his video portraits of composers, "Music with Roots in the Aether."

"Perfect Lives" started as a film treatment, then became a performance, then a record ("Perfect Lives" Lovely Music LML 1001) and now a television series, Ashley says.

"The visual world of "Perfect Lives", according to the prospectus, is the landscape and people of the small-town Midwest, where the story takes place. The live audience will see Pre-recorded landscape scenes on video monitors. The visual presentation of the landscape and the interior landscapes of the live performance detail derives from the montage style of the "evening news."

The relationship between the two landscapes is created both in the plot of the music play and in the visual materials. Each of the episodes is built on a continuous song narration, spoken and sung with layers of rhythmic and vocal support to produce a dreamlike stream of consciousness.

Both Ashley and Schoolman have been sur-

prised at the cooperation they have received in getting the project together. "WGBY was enthusiastic and moved fast to get it off the ground," says Schoolman, noting that it is sometimes hard to deal with New York's WNET.

Ashley hopes the series will serve as a pilot both for future Kitchen performances as well as new music events, not to mention innovative television of the type not regularly aired over PBS.

"The Live from the Kitchen" broadcasts will help to discover the audience for new music," Ashley noted. "I think that we have a lot more of an audience for this than we imagine."

## Six Tapes from California

By Rebecca Moore

Angela Davis prefaces her autobiography, *With My Mind On Freedom*, by saying, "I was reluctant to write this book because concentration on my personal history might detract from the movement which brought my case to the people in the first place. I was also unwilling to render my life as a personal 'adventure' — as though there were a 'real' person separate and apart from the political person..."

Angela's self-effacing assessment of her own role may well be politically correct. Unfortunately, this same self-effacement weakens Ed Guerrero's documentary about her, *Angela Davis: Walls Into Bridges*.

Guerrero focuses on what Angela is doing now—teaching classes in political theory, racism, and blues at San Francisco State. We see the political person in all her activities. Rare are the glimpses of the personal. The result is an unsatisfying social statement, rather than a portrait.

The most interesting segments are those in which Angela lectures her classes. We see the personal as well as political side of the woman who was awarded the 1979 Lenin Peace Prize. But at another point, we see her applauded as she is about to give a speech—without hearing the speech, or knowing what she might say to an adoring audience.

Guerrero has made a documentary that faithfully reflects Angela's own book. But without the personal anecdotes about her family, her prison days, her relationship to the Soledad brothers which reveal her passionate involvement in the struggle for liberation, the documentary falls flat. It is informational without being interesting.

*Western Exposure*  
**Bay Area Video Coalition**  
**Executive Producer**  
**Gail Waldron**



**The Windcatchers**  
by Evelyn Messinger  
**California One**  
by Wendy Blair  
and Martha Olson  
**Wheels Go Round**  
by Jenny Goldberg  
**Clarence Muse**  
by Thurmond White  
**Olivia More Than Music**  
by Anita Clearfield  
**Angela Davis**  
by Ed Guerrero

One of the most disturbing and provocative tapes in the series is *Wheels Go Round*, a documentary about a disabled individual named Neil Jacobsen.

The narrator begins by saying, "I always thought if I were disabled I'd want to commit suicide. . . I figured if any of these disabled people are actually happy then they must have a secret to life that I don't have. . . ." The rest of the tape is a kind of Everything-you-always-wanted-to-know-about-being-disabled.

Producer Jenny Goldberg takes the attitude of an anthropologist studying a foreign culture. She logs every detail: getting out of bed, taking a bath, commuting to work, traveling by subway, working. This kind of microscopic examination embarrassed me. I often felt like a voyeur.

On the other hand, I appreciated the opportunity of getting to know a disabled person: hearing him talk about himself; watching each small victory (getting a shirt over his head); listening to his jokes; and confronting my own feelings about disabled persons.

One of the most moving parts of the documentary is when Neil is asked how he feels when people first meet him. "It's okay not to understand what I say," he replies in his torturous speech. "Some people understand right away. Some people take five minutes. Some people take five hours. My mother still does not understand me. . . I get a headache when I have to hear myself talk. . . But don't worry about it. . ."

Missing from the tape was the response of non-disabled people to Neil. We get brief snippets from his wife, one of his students, and from a subway manager (who comments that the elevator should work "in theory"). But we never get a sense of how they dealt with their own feelings. According to them, they never had any feelings to deal with. Only the narrator and a high school student exhibit any honesty on how non-disabled people often view the disabled — "I'd want to commit suicide. . ."

The strongest documentary I viewed was on Clarence Muse, a Black film star whose presence in Hollywood films was ubiquitous, if unheralded.

Ironically, it was the least sophisticated, despite dissolves and fancy wipes. There are many embarrassing moments in the tape: when the producers first visit Muse and condescend to him because he's old; an interview with director Frank Capra, in which he inanely repeats that Muse was a great "showman," while fighting a fly buzzing at his head; and an obnoxious narrator and opening piece of music that introduce the tape, and are totally wrong for the subject matter.

But these are minor irritations which do not detract from the tape's successful mission: rescuing yet another Black cultural figure from obscur-

ity. The producers mix together anecdotes by film historians, friends, his wife, and Muse himself, with film clips. The potpourri creates a picture of the man: who he is now, what he was then.

Part of the tape is a celebration of Muse's 89th birthday, a silly and potentially awkward event. At one point Muse makes a gradiose speech, then notices the camera. "What the hell are you guys doing here?" he growls. "Get those cameras away," he says, preparing to continue his pontification without benefit of immortalization.

Despite Muse's denture problem, which makes him a little difficult to follow, his stories are fascinating. He tells how he had to learn to talk like Blacks because he acquired a Pennsylvania accent at Dickinsen University. He reflects that "Blacks had to discover me," commenting on new-found fame: he is going to be admitted to the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame.

The film clips make you want to see the movies Muse was in. Many of the roles he played perpetuate racist stereotypes, but he makes several observations about that, including one remark about Steppin Fetchit: "Ain't nobody that lazy. . ."

The six documentaries in the Western Exposure series pose the question: how is an independent producer different from a commercial one?

Produced by the Bay Area Video Coalition with technical assistance from KCET-TV, the tapes are of commercial quality. They should be accepted by PBS for national distribution.

But they also imply that an "indie" is different from a commercial producer *only* in his or her financial relationship to a network. Style, politic, technique, even that elusive concept "quality," are little different from commercial counterparts.

The choice of content — wind energy, feminism, Black history, Angela Davis, a disabled individual — reflects somewhat different values. But even the networks are growing more daring in subject matter as they discover public affairs bring in better ratings.

The commercialization of independent productions seems to legitimize everything non-network. By commercialization I mean increased technical capability and simple production know-how which allow independent producers to get on the air. No longer second-rate amateurs, independents can compete with the best, whatever that is.

But competing with public or private networks also seems to lead to an emphasis of style over content. The three complete tapes I viewed, plus five minute excerpts from two others, shared this weakness. While examining important topics, exuding technical competence, and providing insights into the subjects they explore, the tapes nevertheless drifted towards the superficial. That this is my only criticism, however, is a credit to the tapes.



# VIDEOWEST

By Lloyd Trufelman

Following in the footsteps of alternative FM radio developed in San Francisco a decade ago, *Videowest*, an alternative TV program, is alive and growing in the Bay Area.

*Videowest*, "the television program of the eighties" as it calls itself, is a new television magazine in the form of an electronic *High Times/Mother Jones*. Featuring straight news stories, trend journalism, lifestyle pieces, and rock and roll tapes, the program is an example of the new forms of programming and political attitudes that will start to become more available as television continues its process of demystification and accessibility.

The program is broadcast Wednesday nights at 10 pm on KTSF UHF Channel 26, KQED, the Bay Area VHF PBS outlet, on Sundays at 11:30 pm, and on several cable channels, where the program first got its start.

Each program has its own theme, from Labor, Television, Automobiles, 50's Rock and Roll.

A typical program is divided up into shorts, held together by the program's host, Skoop Nisker. A recent show on energy opened up with, "Ask Dr. Einstein," featuring local performers as Dr. and Mrs. Albert Einstein. Next was a clip from a local rock band named *Times Five*, performing a piece called "Radioactive." After that was a status report on rooftop solar technology, interviewing Amory Lovins and Jane Fonda. *Rolling Stone* reporter Howard Kohn talked about the Karen Silkwood case and showed footage from the trial. The show was wrapped up with 94 year old Emil Gurke talking about his windmill sculpture.

The program gets its material from video professionals who jump at the chance for the freedom not allowed in the workaday world, promo rock videotapes from record companies, and a large number of unsolicited tapes, not to mention material produced by *Videowest's* own staff.

Although the program is a group effort, attention inevitably focuses on Fabrice Florin, the show's founder and producer.

The 24 year old native of France is quick to draw an analogy between the early days of FM radio and *Videowest*. Both are in the same situation: filling unused space in a relatively new

medium that is becoming technologically and economically accessible.

In an interview in *Videowest's* loft space (the sign on the door reads "Karl Marx Entertainment Agency — Das Entertainment") Florin outlined his video viewpoints.

"I haven't given up on TV," he said. "The basic intention of *Videowest* is to produce different programs as an alternative to the junk that's usually on. The fact that the program is on is [politically] dangerous — it shows that there are large numbers of talented people willing to work for free to get their point across."

"The program may seem a bit flaky at first, but this kind of thing is a market trend," he predicted.

Unlike most alternative TV, *Videowest* is gearing away from the non-profit, community access channel mentality. The company is set up as profit making, now breaking even with income of about \$1000 a week. Salaries are not being paid yet, so staffers find other sources of funds, including outside TV production work.

The program rents time on KTSF at local rates (the station normally shows reruns, movies and sports) and runs six commercials per half-hour show. *Videowest* keeps the income from four commercials and the station keeps two. Sometimes if airtime has not been sold, mock commercials are run. The PBS airtime is free. The program also follows *Saturday Nite Live*, which serves as a good lead for the program's audience.

*Videowest* is good television. It's rough around the edges, but alive, mobile, and unafraid to take risks. The show works because it's just plain different.

Florin has decided to stay away from PBS funding. "PBS is too slow, bureaucratic. They can't take chances," he says. "And after all, there are so many alternatives now opening up (cable, disc, UHF, etc.) why go to the dinosaurs like PBS, when you can create new systems yourself?"

Florin is serious about the growth of alternative television. He has dreams of satellite syndication, and tapes of *Videowest* are now available for home consumption.

**Videowest**  
**840 Battery Street**  
**San Francisco, CA 94111**  
**(415) 362-0441**



# Mobil — The Fourth Network

## Herb Schmertz Battles The Big 3/Buys Public TV/ and Sells Public-Mindedness



By James Roman

While the harried consumer reaches deeper into his pocket to pay escalating fuel costs, the oil companies are busily developing strategies to maintain their public image in the midst of increased criticism.

In 1970, when the *New York Times* offered a section of its Op Ed page to advertisers, Mobil launched a public relations campaign in the print media, placing a series of messages about the corporation and its energy policies in the prestigious journal. Soon afterward, Mobil placed similar columns in the *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Mobil's designated audience, through these publications has been an upscale, influential executive cadre readership. At the height of the energy crisis, Mobil's Op Ed messages were appearing in 100 newspapers.

Following the success of its Op Ed strategy Mobil initiated another newspaper feature, "Observations," described by corporation spokesmen as "... a flexible, chatty sometimes irreverent collection of short features stressing company viewpoints." In essence, "Observations" — which the average reader may easily have perceived as a regular column rather than an ad — presented Mobil's position on issues related to energy development, conservation and divestiture. Appearing in ten Sunday publications — including *Parade*, *Family Weekly* and the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* — "Observations" was able to penetrate 45% of all American households. These pointed columns made Mobil significantly more visible to say the least.

The man responsible for shaping Mobil's media stance is Herbert Schmertz, who joined Mobil in 1966 as manager of the corporate labor relations department. In 1969 he became Mobil's vice president for Public Affairs. Noting that, in the past, large corporations generally maintained a passive media position, Schmertz set out to create an active image for Mobil. Some observers

perceived this change as more than active — in fact, aggressive. The Schmertz strategy included responding publicly to any critical stories about Mobil in newspapers and or on television.

In addition to the print messages, Schmertz developed commercials for television, some of which were issue-oriented, designed to sell the company's point of view rather than the company's product. In 1974, Mobil submitted a commercial to the three networks posing the question, "should oil companies be allowed or not allowed to drill for oil and gas beneath the continental shelves?" Showing a beach and an ocean and citing a U.S. Geological Survey Statement that more than 60 billion barrels of oil may exist underneath the continental shelves, the commercial invited viewers to send their opinions to the "Mobil Poll." Of the three networks, NBC alone approved the broadcast of this ad. Rejection by CBS and ABC resulted in a major skirmish between Mobil and the broadcast industry. Among Mobil spokesmen publicly condemning network policy was Rawleigh Warner, Jr., Chairman of Mobil who questioned the ability of a democracy to operate effectively with limited public access to opposing points of view. Decrying the dangers of broadcaster's monopoly over control of information transmitted to the American public, Warner deplored the spectre of censorship as applied to the Mobil information.

Arthur Taylor, then President of CBS, defending network policy, stated that CBS, with a limited amount of advertising time had established a policy to disallow the purchase of airtime for propagandistic purposes. In essence, the networks feared that organizations with strong financial clout could easily monopolize the medium. Critics of Mobil maintained that if the corporation were really interested in public opinion, it could have conducted a scientific poll instead of using a commercial that subtly communicated the corporation's position on off-shore drilling. Indeed, the question was one of access. The networks were unofficial (de-facto) gate-



keepers of the airwaves refusing to allow a large corporation with vast financial resources to air what clearly appeared to be propaganda.

What are the vast financial resources of Mobil? As one of the five largest industrial companies in the United States, Mobil Corp. has gross revenues in excess of \$28 billion. Mobil Corporation, of which Mobil Oil is a subsidiary, also owns Montgomery Ward and Container Corporation of America. Montgomery Ward is one of the largest U.S. retailers with 429 urban and suburban store locations. Container Corporation of America is the largest producer of paperboard packaging in the United States. Mobil Oil Corporation is a major producer of crude oil, petroleum products and natural gas with more than 14,000 oil and gas wells in the United States. Mobil Oil refines approximately 778,000 barrels of oil and produces 2-3 billion cubic feet of natural gas daily. Mobil and its various subsidiaries do business in more than 100 countries employing nearly 200,000.

In 1976, Mobil had a major battle with the National Broadcasting Company when it disputed the facts presented on a NBC five part series entitled, "The Great Gasoline War." The series, hosted by Liz Trotta, examined the oil crisis of 1973, oil company profits, gasoline dealer complaints, divestiture and other energy related issues. When asked to participate in the series, Mobil spokesmen declined, claiming that their remarks would have been edited out or watered down. Instead, Mobil embarked on an ambitious advertising campaign to refute the claims made in the NBC series. Lengthy ads titled, "What ever happened to fair play?" were placed in the *New York Times*, *The Daily News* and the *Wall Street Journal*. The ads presented Mobil's viewpoint on seventeen of the key issues presented in the series. Next to each of the comments, Mobil inserted a picture of a hatchet and used the heading, "Hatchet Job." Mobil, while declining to participate in the series, offered to purchase 30 minutes of air time to rebut NBC's charges. Like CBS before it, NBC, refused to sell time to Mobil, stating that it would not permit purchase of rebuttal time because only special interest groups with money could afford such a purchase. Further, NBC stated that the proper forum for the discussion of controversial issues was on its news, discussion and interview programs.

In September, 1978 the network trilogy was completed and ABC came under the attack of Mobil. On August 8, ABC's *20/20* presented a segment on the natural gas deregulation bill. Hugh Downs and Sylvia Chase reported on the potential negative pricing affects that deregulation would stimulate. In addition, comments on the program alluded to a possible contrivance by gas producers to keep supplies of natural gas low during the Winter of 76-77. Again, Schmertz and

Mobil aggressively responded. In New York, a newspaper strike prevented Mobil's complete saturation of the print media. However, several active papers were found including *Variety*. Mobil used a similar campaign to the one employed against NBC in 1976. This time the full page advertisements were titled, "ABC-TV's *20/20* needs its eyes examined," Mobil claimed that ABC used a "host of tired clichés," and that the program's anti business attitude "created a shocking spectacle" — This time Mobil rebutted 12 points made in the broadcast. Each point was headed with the phrase "Bad Eyesight" and next to each appeared a picture of a shattered pair of spectacles.

The full page ads also included Mobil's offer to make a five minute film at the company's expense to be broadcast on ABC or *20/20*. ABC's statement about not selling time for comment on controversial issues was also printed. In addition, several negative critical reviews of the series appeared in the advertisement.

Dissatisfied with network treatment of energy issues, Mobil embarked on the creation of its own "fourth network," the "Mobil Showcase" presentations. For a corporation with the vast financial resources of Mobil, initiating a fourth network was not a difficult task. The first limited series to appear on the "network" was a BBC acquisition titled *Ten Who Dared*. This was followed by *When Havoc Struck*, *Between the Wars* and *Edward the King*.

While not a network in the strict sense, Mobil was able to line up an impressive number of stations in many of the nation's largest markets. In some markets, the programs were aired by an independent station; in others, a network affiliated station. In addition, Mobil was able to produce the effect of network simultaneity by having the various stations broadcast the series on the same day at the same time. For example, in New York *Edward the King* was broadcast by WNEW (5) on Wednesday at 8:00 p.m. An interesting competitive development occurred between Mobil's presentation of *Edward the King* and CBS. CBS originally owned the American broadcasting rights to *Edward*. However, the fierce rating competition by the three networks precluded the use of *Edward* on the CBS network. CBS sold the rights to Mobil, which later syndicated the series. The ironic twist is that many CBS network affiliates decided to broadcast *Edward* on Wednesday in their 8:00-9:00 p.m. time slot. To do this, they could not of course broadcast the regular Wednesday 8:00-9:00 p.m. CBS network offering, *The Incredible Hulk*. As a result, ratings for the *Hulk* dropped drastically.

Each Mobil Showcase series is backed with a significant amount of promotion. Award winning designers are commissioned to create stimulating and eye catching graphic designs. Three months

**What does Mobil gain by operating its own network? Basically, the answer is control over the entire programming, distribution and exhibition process.**



**For about the same cost as sponsoring two network specials Mobil can televise ten hours of material in fifty of the nation's largest markets.**

before air date, promotional managers from each of the participating stations are invited to a full day workshop and familiarized with the Mobil marketing strategy. Interesting media events staged as press previews are arranged. For example, four survivors from several disasters documented in *When Havoc Struck* were interviewed by the press in New York. The Foreign Policy Association sponsored two receptions for advance screenings of *Between the Wars* and *Edward the King*.

Mobil showcase stations are provided with various promotional tools. Each station receives print "tune-in" ads designed by Mobil for placement in local newspapers. The station also receives thirty second radio/television promotional spots produced by Mobil and ready for use. As an adjunct to the station's promotion, Mobil places premiere episode advertisements in major newspapers around the country. Specialized ad campaigns are also used including an outdoor advertising blitz placing posters in bus stops, shelters, train stations, kiosks and on billboards. Broadcasting trade journals like *Variety*, *Broadcasting* and *Radio/Television Age* are also used to promote the Mobil showcase series. Prior to the telecasting of *Between the Wars*, Mobil placed various historical questions related to the series in the *N.Y. Times*. The answers were scattered throughout the newspaper and the technique was used to entice readers to view the series.

Mobil also arranged an educational tie-in to promote its series among students. Prime Time School Television, an organization specializing in school tie ins, circulated an all inclusive teachers' guide for the series. *Book Digest* prepared colorful program guides which were inserted in *Book Digest* magazine. *Scholastic Magazine* prepared teleguides to be sent to high school principles.

Naturally, all of the promotion culminates in the broadcast of the series. Each series segment is shown uninterrupted and includes a three minute commercial about Mobil. These commercials, part of the American documentary imagination series, were specially produced for the Mobil Showcase presentations. Each focuses on the life of a creative American whose individual efforts exemplify the American way of life. The message stressed in the commercials is that, "nothing is as easy to see as the imagination of a genius and nothing is as difficult to see as the imagination of a corporation."

What does Mobil gain by operating its own "network?" Basically, the answer is control over the entire programming, distribution and exhibition process. In the past, Mobil claimed that the networks exercised far too much control over programming. Now Mobil is controlling its own programming by passing the networks and going directly to the station.

Mobil assists in the development of programming for its "Showcase." It selects material

that will appeal to a specific type of audience. Mobil's target audience consists of well-educated individuals who hold decision making positions in our society. The company distributes the series in those markets where it hopes to reach its potential target audience.

Another advantage to Mobil is the financial gain that results from operating its own network. For about the same cost as sponsoring two network specials Mobil can televise ten hours of material in fifty of the nation's largest markets.

The most effective gain for Mobil appears to be the visibility and prestige it receives for sponsoring such "quality" programming. Through its aggressive promotion Mobil creates awareness of its public mindedness by presenting a series of "quality" programs to viewers. The commercial messages are designed to demystify, de-institutionalize and personalize the Mobil corporation. Viewers are presented not with a product, but with a very positive image of a large multinational corporation. In view of such offerings, who could doubt the good intentions of Mobil? As Mobil states, its support of quality programming shows that it's a, "good company to work for, a good company to do business with and a good company in which to invest."

However, there are some who do question Mobil's good intentions. Much of the criticism leveled against Mobil is directed at its public television activities. Before the "Mobil Showcase" concept ever materialized, Mobil was an active underwriter in public television. The corporation immediately realized the potential of public broadcasting and became the first multinational company to underwrite public programming. In fact, shortly after the creation of the Public Broadcasting Service, Mobil, in 1970, became its first major program contributor by underwriting *Masterpiece Theater* and providing \$1 million to produce and distribute the series.

What official position does Mobil take toward public broadcasting? Mobil's Chairman Rawleigh Warner, "We support it because we believe it enriches society; and when society flourishes, business does." Vice President for Public Affairs Herbert Schmertz asserts that corporations have a responsibility in supporting the arts as well as a duty to contribute in some way to the enrichment of society.

When he appeared before the Carnegie Commission on February 21, 1978, Schmertz testified that Mobil planned not merely to give away money but also to utilize corporate resources and skills in an effort to build a wider audience for public broadcasting. In his testimony before the Carnegie Commission, Schmertz claimed that Mobil's only motivation for supporting public television is an altruistic one. Mobil wants to present programs of quality which will in turn attract more viewers and supporters to public television. Other statements made by Schmertz,



however, show clearly that one of Mobil's primary objectives is to utilize public television as a promotional tool—a tool, "that has persuaded an important segment of our society to look at Mobil in a new light," according to Schmertz.

Mobil's promotional role in public television is just as zealous as for its showcase presentations on commercial television. The corporation spends almost as much to promote *Masterpiece Theater* (\$915,000) as it does to underwrite it (\$1.5 million).

Just as with the Mobil Showcase network, there are economic advantages to Mobil's participation in public television. By purchasing foreign programs (mostly British) they receive maximum exposure at minimum costs. Mobil's support of *The Entertainer*, which was aired by the National Broadcasting Company network in 1975, cost the corporation \$1.2 million for the two hours it was on the air. However, Mobil put that amount plus \$800,000 more (a total of \$2 million) into public broadcasting. Mobil, then, while getting two hours on commercial television for \$1.2 million can cadge 70 hours on public television for \$2 million, *plus* countless reruns!

Cost of production, then seems to have helped shape Mobil's underwriting policies. Foreign productions purchased and brought to America are much less expensive than productions done in America. Mobil has taken advantage of this fact. It generally buys British Broadcasting Company ("BBC") programs and pays a fraction of the original production costs. There are at least two advantages to this. One is the obvious advantage in production cost. The second, less obvious advantage is that all BBC acquisitions have been tested on an English-speaking market.

This practice has not occurred without its critics. Schmertz answered the criticisms by maintaining that: art knows no national boundaries. He went on to say that Mobil in fact has supported domestic programming through the underwriting of such programs as *The Best of Families*, *Decade of Decisions*, *The Way It Was*, *National Town Meeting* and *the Search for the Real America*. But these series constitute no more than a drop in the bucket when compared to Mobil's total underwriting record. Since 1970 it has underwritten approximately 60 foreign-produced series. One outspoken critic of Mobil's tactics equates citing of only five domestic program series with "trying to eradicate a mountain by referring to a molehill."

Schmertz also attempted to justify the huge number of foreign-produced programs by stating that "the flow of American programming to British television is far greater than the number of British programs broadcast on this side." He conveniently ignores the fact that British television is governed by a content ruling providing that no more than 14% of its programming be imported. By comparison, in America, where there is no

such rule, 23.3% of all prime time PBS scheduling for fiscal year 1977 consisted of foreign programming.

A critical area of concern in public television is the amount of control a corporation has over programming through the underwriting process. An interesting case occurred in 1970 with the debut of *The Nader Report*, a public affairs series (not funded by a corporation). At that time Mobil was completing its agreement to underwrite its *Masterpiece Theater* series. *The Nader Report* — its first segment dealing with deceptive television advertising and using as one of its examples a Mobil advertisement explaining the cleanliness of its gasoline—was delayed until after the Mobil underwriting agreement was sealed. Even then, when the program was finally aired it did not contain the Mobil reference.

Probably the most conspicuous example of program control occurred with the series *The Way It Was*. This 13-part half-hour series was simply created by Mobil's Vice President for Public Affairs, Herbert Schmertz and was underwritten by Mobil at approximately \$30,000 per episode. Highlighting great moments in sports, *The Way It Was* had been planned and conceived by Schmertz and likely would not have made its way to television had not Mobil provided underwriting funds for its presentation. Officially listed as produced by KCET, it was actually produced by an independent company in Los Angeles and overseen by Schmertz. Writing about the program, critic John O'Conner said, "Public TV may have come up with still another sports show, but that is not exactly what was envisioned for the 'alternative network.'"

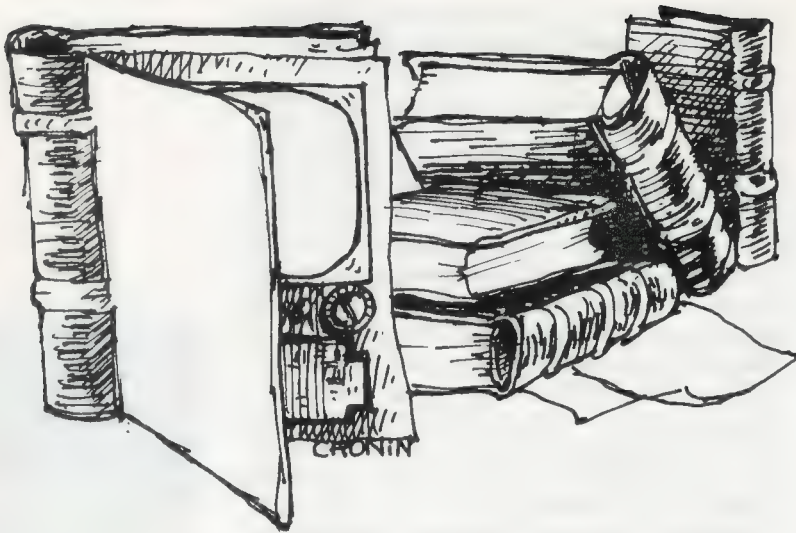
Joan Sullivan, producer of *Masterpiece Theater* at WGBH in Boston, claimed that Mobil is an enlightened, progressive corporation with a real interest in aesthetics. She admitted, however, that Mobil, like other underwriters, is influenced by ratings and is therefore reluctant to underwrite any type of "experimental" program. Like other corporations, Mobil prefers a "non-intimidating program format." Sullivan also claimed that WGBH made all content decisions in connection with *Masterpiece Theater*, but in view of Schmertz' remarks this statement is not altogether believable. Certainly, Mobil decides which series will be imported for viewing on its *Masterpiece Theater*.

Clearly Mobil has made an art of using television as an effective promotional tool. They have built an image of a concerned company that is laboring to make America a better place to work and play. Who can question their divine motives? It is indeed the Mobil moment, for Mobil has learned that a company is known by the company it keeps.

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# American Advertising: A Review

*Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*,  
by Stuart Ewen,  
McGraw-Hill.

*The Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate*,  
by Erik Barnouw,  
Oxford University Press.

**By Walter Carroll**

A friend of mine recently mentioned that she had written to a well-known soap manufacturer to protest the mindless, sexist character of its 'ring around the collar' television commercials. The reply was direct. The manufacturer regretted offending her, but their sales had increased significantly due to that advertising campaign. The commercials would continue.

My point in relating this anecdote is not to launch a diatribe against the stupidity of many commercials. The target is an easy one and has been frequently hit. Rather, I wish to consider the place of advertising in American society and how it got there. The two books under review provide the beginnings of such an analysis. They are quite different and operate on different levels of analysis, but taken together they are helpful to anyone who seeks to understand the rise of advertising and its relation to major changes in the United States. Among the major changes is the rise of television broadcasting.

Ewen's book helps in understanding much that Erik Barnouw describes in his work. In *Captains of Consciousness* Stuart Ewen relates the development of the advertising industry to American capitalism. From a Marxist perspective, Ewen describes the "emergence of important aspects of American industrial culture in the twentieth century: mass consumption and modern advertising . . . within the context of the social history of American industrialization.

The concept of social control is central to his analysis. In the late nineteenth century the locus of attempts by American capitalists to control the working class was the production process. Workers were progressively stripped of their skills and of their control over work. Here Ewen draws on Braverman's important study of the 'degradation of labor,' *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. Monopoly

capitalism refers to control by an ever smaller number of larger firms over major sectors of the economy. The monopoly capitalist phase of American development dates from around the turn of the century. Through a double process of re-organizing work, that is, deskilling labor, and re-organizing the authority structures of work, corporations succeeded in gaining greater control of the workplace and the work process. This control was achieved in the face of great resistance by workers.

By about 1920 mass production was established. Ewen argues that the advertising industry developed for two reasons. First, the quantities of goods being produced had to be sold and consumed. This required reorienting workers from habits and values which emphasized thrift and savings to a consumption ethic. To sell the goods, new needs and values had to be sold. The attempt to sell new values is related to the second purpose of advertising: the creation and selling of a new culture.

This new culture stressed mass consumption, but it signified more than that. The new culture was an attempt to establish control over the everyday lives of workers. It stretched into their families and communities. Business offered "an affirmative vision—a new mechanism—of social order in the realm of daily life to confront the resistance of people whose work lives were increasingly defined by the rigid parameters of industrial production and their corporate bureaucracies."

Advertising created this 'affirmative vision.' It shifted the definition of 'freedom' for workers from their lives at work, to their homes and families.

Attention was directed away from production and toward consumption. Ewen calls this aspect of advertising 'obliterating the factory.' By focusing on life outside of work, business hoped to



remove from public consciousness and debate questions of what was being produced and of the conditions of production. If work was unpleasant and monotonous, the choice of consumption goods could provide the sense of community and fulfillment not found at work. Questions of freedom and choice could be tied to consumption and defuse possible questioning of the capitalism system. "The basic impulse in advertising was one of control, of actively channeling social impulses toward a support of corporation capitalism and its productive and distributive priorities."

Ewen clearly shows the political nature of advertising and of the new ideology of consumerism. Educators, artists, and social scientists were enlisted to help develop the new ideology. Education, for example, should emphasize the 'world of facts' of the marketplace, that is, things as they were. Social scientists and artists were consulted on the means of selling the needed habits and desires, as well as particular products.

There were two major barriers to working class acceptance of the new culture of consumerism. Wages were too low for many to be able to consume at hoped-for levels. Moreover, many people still held values and beliefs which ran counter to the new ideology. "Traditional family structures, agricultural life styles, and immigrant values" militated against acceptance of advertising paean to consuming.

Ewen shows how these barriers to consumption were overcome. Wages were raised, but, more importantly, the basis of family life was redefined. As production and production knowledge were increasingly centered in the factory, the definition of the family changed. "The factory was the basis of social organization and the family of interdependent workers but a relic of the past, devoid of any material underpinnings of necessity beyond their dependency on one another's wage."

Ewen sees these developments as transforming the nature of authority within the family, thus opening up families to the appeals of advertising. Children especially became targets, as 'youth' was glorified and then sold as a commodity through various products which would make one look younger. The family provided "a conduit to . . . goods consumption" and the appeal to youth was a major aspect of that conduit.

There is more in *Captains of Consciousness*. Ewen examines the role of women in the changing family. Much of his book consists of numerous examples drawn from extensive reading in advertising magazines and books. He has convincingly demonstrated that the advertising industry not only helped develop the mass consumer market needed by the burgeoning mass production system, but also generated an ideology of mass consumption which was political in nature. That ideology aimed at defusing

discontent in America.

There are some weaknesses in his argument. First, he shows what business *intended*, but slights the actual reception of advertising's messages by American workers. His picture is one-sided. Second, his conception of America as a mass production system leaves out central aspects of the social relations in a capitalist society. Third, his treatment of family changes and the role of women are not totally convincing. Finally, by concentrating on the more egregious examples of advertising he may undermine his own arguments about the role of advertising as an industry and focus attention on only *bad* advertising. Notwithstanding these criticisms, I think that Ewen has written a book which should be the starting point for further efforts in the study of advertising and mass consumption in their social context. Due to its strengths his work is useful as a basis for reading Erik Barnouw's *The Sponsor*.

While Barnouw, in contrast to Ewen, does not take an explicitly Marxist position, his work is also a radical one. Barnouw is the leading American historian of broadcasting. In this volume he draws upon his vast knowledge to chronicle the rise, present status, and prospects of advertising and sponsors in television. Specifically, he looks at the changing nature of sponsorship and its impact on programming. Barnouw points out that his underlying theme is power "exercised in forms seldom associated in the average person's mind with power, and perhaps all the more telling for that reason."

Commercial television developed along the paths originally followed by radio. After reading Ewen's analysis of the rise of advertising, one can scarcely consider that such a powerful communication medium could have remained noncommercial. The utility of television for teaching the new mass consumption culture was too clear.

In the early days of television sponsors played a direct, controlling role in programming. By the early 1960's, however, there had been a shift in the relations between sponsors and networks. Networks became dissatisfied with the degree of control wielded by advertisers and began to assert more control. But even with network control the sponsor—the modern potentate—is still powerful. "The sponsor may be viewed as a potentate with a strong influence over currents of thought in our society, exercised mainly through television, in various ways and in various degrees."

Of course the power of the sponsor is absolute over the commercial, but the power runs even more deeply. This power is not exercised only for merchandising. Barnouw notes "commercials are deeply involved in ideological conflict." Here the arguments of Ewen are further supported, as Barnouw describes the present system in terms that echo Ewen's account of its development. Commercials perform two tasks: they manufac-



ture a demand for products, and "for the multinational corporation, a more pressing task is legitimation of its vast and often mysterious operations."

In other words, the purpose of many commercials is the legitimation of power. To the extent that such legitimation succeeds, attention is deflected away from the basic social arrangements of our society.

Barnouw also examines entertainment programming, news, and public television. He emphasizes that many Americans get more and more about what they know about the world from television. This corporate-dominated system continues to foster the culture of mass consumption, and to restrict discussion of issues such as social change, choice, and freedom to the realm of consumption. Other issues are obscured.

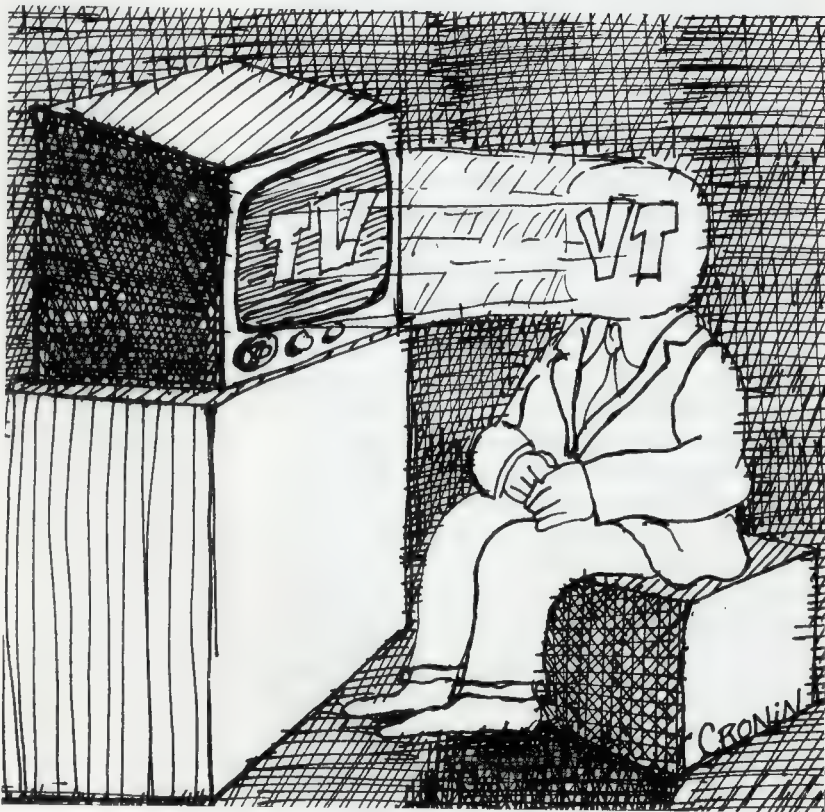
Nuclear energy is an example which allows us to judge the effectiveness of the system. Barnouw's account of the manner in which television glossed over and obscured the dangers of nuclear power is instructive. Since television is dominated by large corporations, and since many of these corporations have interests in nuclear energy, almost everything that appeared on television on that topic up to about 1970 was optimistic and reassuring. Television and advertising ensure that many key issues will be obscured. But are they? Many Americans are now alerted to the dangers of nuclear energy. While television can generate false images, these images often collide

with an obdurate reality—Three Mile Island, for example. This is certainly true of efforts to obscure the underlying economic and social arrangements of our society. How effective is the attempt to shift attention away from these?

Barnouw sees the necessity of a "basic revision of economic arrangements, and the communications system interlocked with them." The advertising industry is certainly part of those economic arrangements. Barnouw and Ewen agree that far-reaching changes in the nature of American society are necessary, especially in the organization of production. While the two books contain much material on what business, advertising, and broadcasting have aimed at they tell us little about how change will come about. While more studies should follow the paths established by these two books, the new studies should do something more if they are to help in assessing the possibilities of change.

While it is vital to know the purposes of the controllers, it is even more important to know how people respond to the attempted control. How successful is the culture of mass consumption in selling the new way of life and ideology? What forms of resistance do people engage in? Do they really accept the messages? This is what we need to know now.

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### **The White House Conference On Library and Information Services, November 15-18, 1979, Washington, D.C.**

This conference was convened to help shape policy on public access and distribution of information in this country. The 70's were called the information decade and there has been lots of publicity about the new communications technologies, their world wide impact, the information explosion and the role of libraries in all of this. The chairman of the White House Conference, Charles Benton, is president of Films, Inc. His selection seemed to be an acknowledgment of the importance of non-print and perhaps the new technologies for libraries.

Libraries all over the United States are presently faced with financial difficulties in simply staying open, retaining existing staff and purchasing books. Funded primarily by local governments, libraries must compete for their revenues with all other municipal services like the police and fire department. Unfortunately library services, viewed as expendable, are often the first victims of budget cuts. In California, 22% of the state's 3,857 county libraries have closed down. In addition to budget cuts, the cost of books has risen 106% since 1969.



Compounding these major problems, is the information explosion and the dramatic impact the new technologies have had on expanding information sources. Libraries must utilize increasingly sophisticated technologies and data bases to serve their constituencies. At the present time, business, the government and a few library demonstration projects have access to these data bases. I had hoped that this conference would discuss the importance of access for all groups to this information and that it would be viewed as imperative and not as a frill or a luxury library service.

The glossy program said this conference had been 22 years in the making at a cost of \$3.5 million. The 911 delegates represented a cross-section of "library and information users or potential users" (2/3 of the delegates) and library and information professionals.

A quick reading of the program did not show much focus on new technologies or even non-print, though there was a good deal of information on the "Conference Information Center"—a state of the art center with four activity areas: information on demand; conference communications; state resolutions, and media for the blind and physically handicapped. Delegates were shown how to use the various computerized data bases and there were teletext and viewdata as well as video demonstrations.

The five topics of the conference were library and information services for: 1) personal needs 2) lifelong learning 3) business and professions 4) governing society and 5) international cooperation and understanding. The five "theme" speeches focused on more effectively delivering information to people. Herbert Bennington of the MITRE Corporation was the only one of the five keynote speakers to actually discuss new technologies and what they mean to information dissemination. He told the audience that presently with communications satellites it would be possible to transfer the 17 million volumes in the Library of Congress to London in about 8 hours. He emphasized and advocated the free market information services approach to new technologies.

Major R. Owens, New York State Senator spoke on the theme of libraries and information services for governing society. He stressed the library as the only source of really *thorough* information that all people have access to. He complained of television helping to create an illiterate citizenry. (This statement drew applause from the delegates.)

President Carter also spoke the first day of the conference. Though Mr. Carter was trying to broaden his concept of what libraries can do, "the joys of visual presentation, movies and slides," it was clear that when Mr. Carter thought "library," he thought "books." When he thought "li-

brarian," it was "the calm, reasoned guidance of a qualified (female) librarian." He concluded by telling the delegates they had a "friend in the White House." Delegates near me grumbled about this statement since OMB and their friend are considering cutting many of the federally funded library programs.

I attended the luncheon on "The Impact of Telecommunications on our Society." The speakers were, Nicholas Johnson, National Citizens Communications Lobby and Robert B. Pfannkuch, President of Bell and Howell's Video Group. Their abbreviated discussions were preceded by an excerpt from an NBC news story called "Telefuture."

Technically the tape was terrible. It was a poor edit, with long pauses between each segment, the audio was almost unintelligible, and the quality of the dub was poor. It was the kind of presentation that gives audiovisual a bad name, compounded because one of the speakers was from Bell & Howell. Aside from the bad technical quality, the content was superficial and not particularly informative. A surface view, i.e. here's the video disc, satellites and can they ever handle a lot of information. I was surprised they did not have a library person who was using some of these new technologies speak at this luncheon. Ideally this person would have tied together what Johnson and Pfannkuch were talking about and put it in the context of the conference themes, since they did not.

Though these speeches and presentations were not the core of the conference (the delegate working sessions/caucuses were), and the conference was not a meeting of library professionals, I still felt that these presentations could have provided much more relevant information for the delegates. What does the expansion of library services mean to a community in terms of training, access, budget? How can your community get access to these data bases?

Though some of the speakers dealt specifically with information access (Johnson, Nader) the relevance of some of the other speakers was more difficult to pinpoint. For some it appeared that geography must have been a consideration, others had supported libraries when in office; still others were in the information business (National Public Radio). Many of these speeches did not seem to be dealing with the immediate concerns of many of the delegates.

At the conference conclusion delegates presented the President and Congress 34 resolutions they had passed, calling for an increased federal role in library funding. (Currently the federal government covers about 5% of national library costs.) The delegates' library priorities were clearly not the new technologies but obtaining funds to stay open.

—Gayle Gibbons

**The White House Conference on Libraries 22 Years in the Making at a cost of \$3.5 million**

**The delegates' priorities were not the new technologies but obtaining funds to stay open.**



# CTW's New Science Series

## The Role of Formative Research

By Barbara Myerson Katz

How do you create a television program for an audience that is very sophisticated about watching TV, but not yet experienced with the subject of your program? The audience is children between the ages of eight and twelve, the subject is science and technology, and the organization that has been grappling with this question for over two years is the Children's Television Workshop (CTW), creators of *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company*. For over two years formative researchers have lived with that question, and worked with producers in an attempt to answer it.

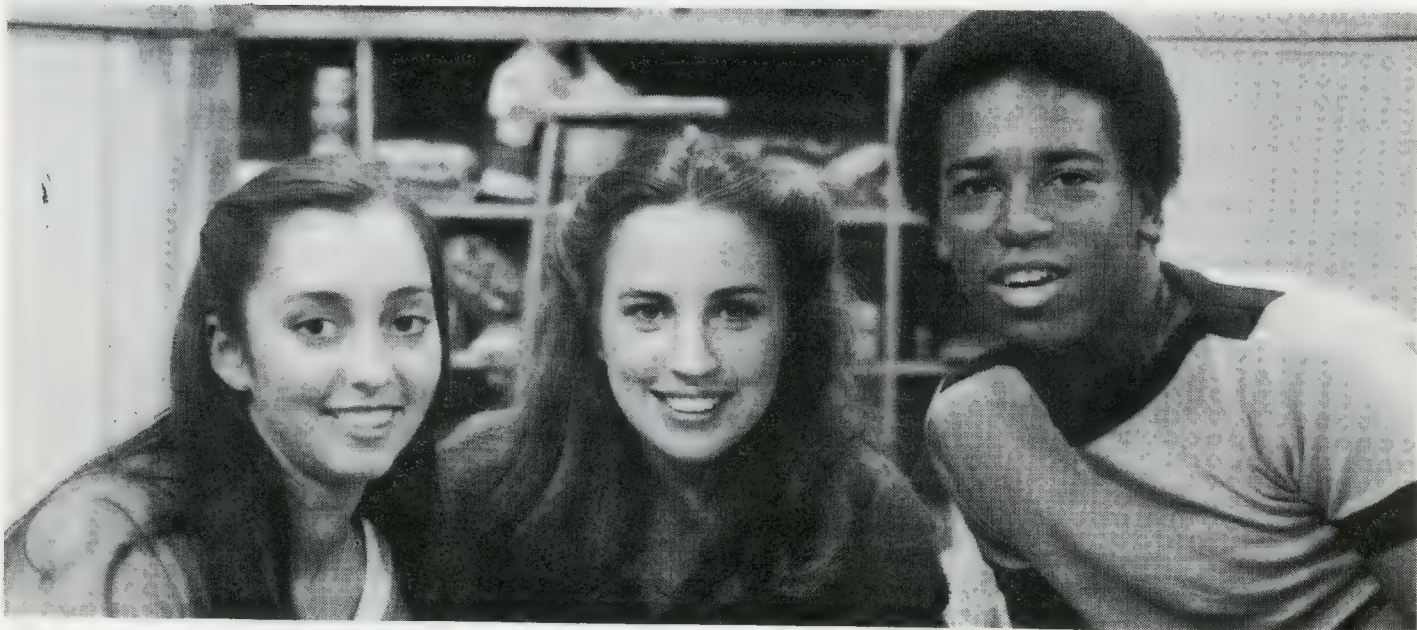
CTW's new series addresses three general goals: to help children experience the joy of scientific exploration and creativity and motivate them to pursue further scientific activities; to help children become familiar with various styles of scientific thinking to stimulate their own thinking skills so that they can learn to analyze important social issues related to science and technology; to help children, with special appeal to girls and minority children, to recognize science and technology as a cooperative human endeavor open to their participation.

The series will consist of 65 half-hour shows, broadcast daily on the Public Broadcasting System, 5 shows a week for 13 weeks, premiering on PBS January 14, 1980. The show is aimed primarily at children viewing at home. It is also hoped that the

series will be used in schools, and there will be a weekly broadcast during school hours. A Teacher's Guide and other utilization materials have been prepared.

*3-2-1 Contact* will be a magazine show composed of documentary film, animation, studio-produced wrap-around, music and special effects. Three teen-aged hosts have been filmed in locations throughout the United States, meeting people involved in many areas of science, and participating in their pursuits. The series will also include a recurring segment called "The Bloodhound Gang," which features three young people who solve mysteries. Their adventures provide a model for inductive problem-solving.

Formative evaluation has been an important part of the production process at CTW for over 10 years. The process through which producers and researchers work together has developed into what has been termed the "CTW model." Edward L. Palmer, Vice President for Research at CTW, described the model in 1974, "If there is a single, most critical condition for rendering ... a model of researcher-producer cooperation effective, it is that the researchers and producers cannot be marching to different drummers. The model is essentially a model for production planning. More specifically, it is a model for planning the educational (as opposed to the dramatic) aspects of the production — and formative research is an integral part of that process."



*3-2-1 Contact* hosts, Ginny Ortiz as Trini, Liz Moses as Lisa, and Leon Grant as Marc.



## Pre-production Research and Planning

This project began in January 1977 with a nine-month feasibility study, which culminated in a funding proposal. During that period, both producers and researchers examined closely the current state of science education. They also substantiated their sense that children 8-12 are developmentally ready to explore the issues and concepts that fall under the rubric of science and technology. They established that such intellectual readiness was matched by children's natural curiosity about the world.

The staff, for example, examined studies of science achievement among the target audience. The motivation to produce the series was based in part on data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1973 and 1977 which indicated that science achievement was declining in the schools, particularly among young girls and minority children.

Researchers joined in the search for scientists, engineers, and science educators who would serve as advisors to the project. Conferences were organized to explore the goals of the series, and to elicit potential show ideas. The team also familiarized itself with various National Science Foundation-funded classroom curricula, and in so doing, explored a variety of ways of organizing the vast body of science material.

One of the prime objectives of the new series is to encourage greater interest in science among those children who traditionally have not acquired it early in their school careers. Formative researchers began exploring the differences and similarities among the interests of girls and boys, and minority and non-minority children.

Early on the staff considered the responses of the target audience to existing TV shows. The staff was naturally aware of the importance of TV and entertainment to 8-12 year-olds, and also knew that these children put great stock in star personalities—The Fonz, Mork, and Charlie's Angels for example. The formative researchers would ultimately carry out a detailed investigation of the TV viewing environment of this target age group, but the question itself immediately raised a problem: Could the new series make the serious subject matter of science entertaining but still give children the message that science is interesting in and of itself? In addition, although an in-school broadcast was planned by CTW, the new series was intended primarily to help fill a vacuum in home-viewed programming on PBS for 8-12 year-olds. CTW did not want to shy away from presenting complexities in the subject matter, but had to consider the special problems such presentations could cause for the child watching at home alone. This need to find a judicious blend of entertainment and science for the series alternately hampered and propelled *3-2-1 Contact* throughout its development.

## Development and Adaptation of Research Techniques

These difficult questions led to the initial forays of the research team into the assessment of children's responses to science on the screen. Before testing could begin, however, it was necessary to develop several new methods for studying the responses of this age group to TV material. The 8-12 year-old age range was a new target for CTW. The group would be no older than the *Sesame Street* and *Electric Company* audiences, and so perhaps more susceptible to peer influence and notions of social acceptability when responding to researchers. Yet the 8-12 year-olds would also be more verbal and articulate, able to say *why* they liked or disliked something on TV, able to ask questions demonstrating comprehension or lack of understanding, yet still lacking adult sophistication. Any new method to be used with this younger group would have to be carefully assessed and piloted before it could be safely relied upon.

The research team had to develop tasks that would elicit honest, individual responses from children, positive and negative, and that would be easy for children to complete with a minimum of obtrusive adult supervision. For the producers, the responses would have to relate in valid and intuitively sensible ways to the content and format of material being tested. Also it would be important for reliability to see more than just a few children, and to replicate results under similar conditions across a series of testing sessions.

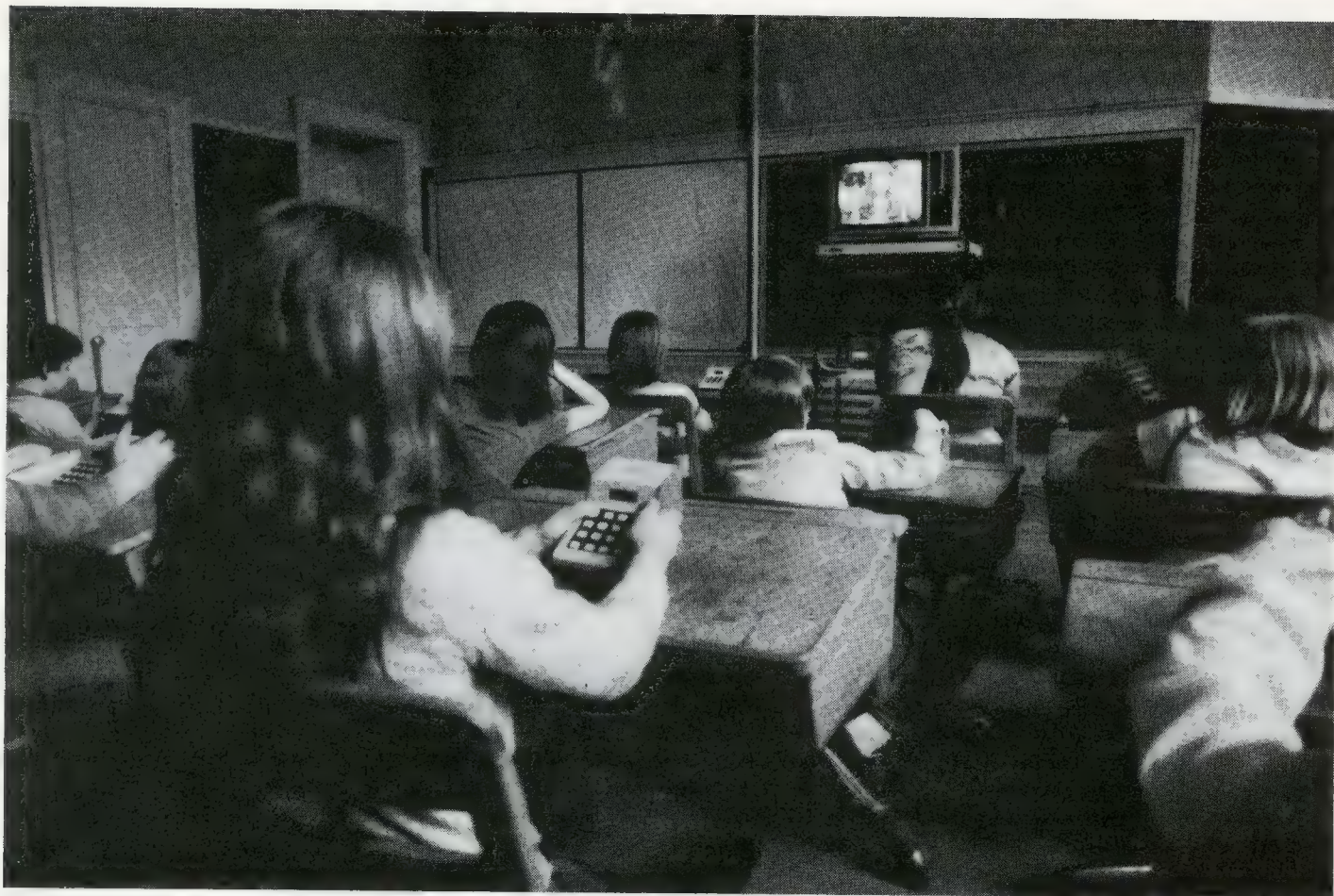
*Sesame Street* researchers had successfully employed a Slide Detractor to assess moment-by-moment appeal of program material with preschoolers. Here individual children watched a particular TV program in competition with a slide display which presented a new still picture every 7½ seconds. A researcher would observe the child, noting for each 7½ seconds, the proportion of time when the child's eye's were on the TV, versus elsewhere. The guiding theory was that as long as the TV could compete successfully for the attention of the child, the program material could be judged relatively appealing. From the researcher's observations of eyes-on versus eyes-off the TV, a moment-by-moment graph of appeal could be produced. Researchers and producers then collaborated in attempting to identify those features of the program content most and least capable of sustaining viewer attention.

When *3-2-1 Contact* researchers tried this method with an older audience, however, they discovered that even 8-year-olds could actually watch *both* the TV and the slide display at roughly the same time. Indeed, children were able to recall what most of the slides and virtually all of the TV program were about.

During the formative testing of CTW's 1974-

***3-2-1 Contact*  
65 half-hour shows  
produced by  
Children's Television  
Workshop  
premiered  
January 14, 1980**





Young viewers respond to a 3-2-1 *Contact* test show, using the PEAC hand-held units.

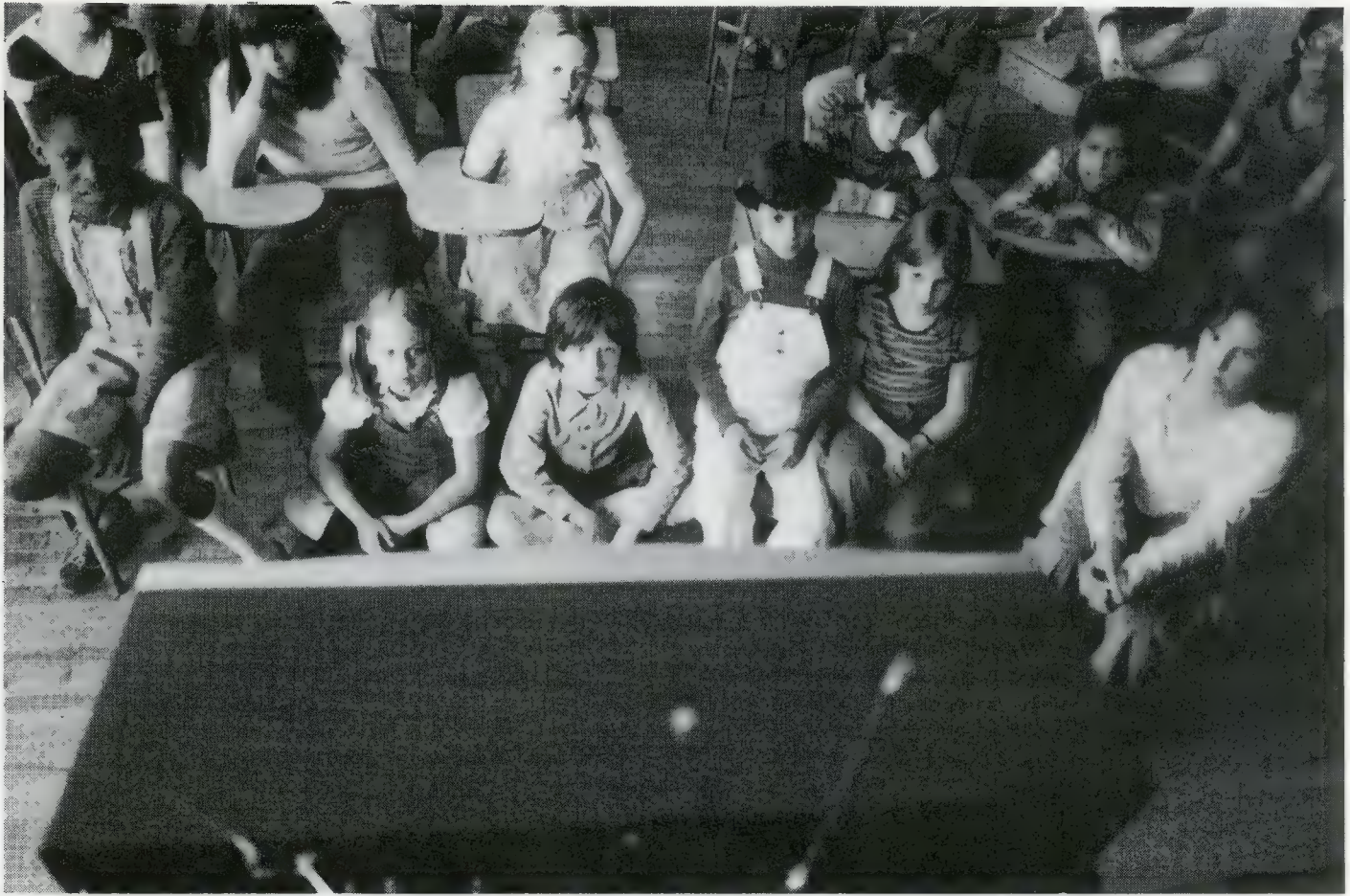
75 health series *Feeling Good*, CTW researchers had successfully used a version of the *Stanton-Lazarsfeld Program Analyzer* to assess moment-by-moment appeal of program material with groups of adults. CTW's Program Analyzer has twenty individual buttons, attached through a wiring harness to an event recorder, resembling an electrocardiograph machine. The event recorder has twenty heat-sensitive styluses, one corresponding to each button. Whenever a button is pressed, the stylus makes a mark on a moving paper scroll. Respondents can be asked as they view a program to press a button when they see something that they especially enjoy, for example. By noting real-time program events on the finished scroll, researchers and producers can literally get a picture of the parts of a program that individuals in the audience particularly liked as they were watching. Thus it is possible to obtain insights that would not be possible to reconstruct psychologically after viewing, when a respondent would evaluate program segments in light of the entire show. The Program Analyzer also has the advantage of protecting the privacy of the individual's responses even while gathering data from a large group, since the button can be concealed in a respondent's hand, under a table top,

or beneath the arm of a chair.

It appeared, then, that the Program Analyzer might be a good device for determining 8-12 year-olds' moment-by-moment responses to TV material. It would allow children to respond spontaneously to a program as they watched, and large groups of children could view at once, while the individuality of responses would be ensured. But would 8-12 year-olds be able to understand and remember instructions to press buttons for specific responses throughout a 30-minute, or longer test program?

The researchers experimented with various combinations of response instructions for the children. The *Feeling Good* test audiences worked with 2 buttons per person — one for a negative response, and one for a positive response. It seemed easier to give each child a single response option, but the overall instructions would have to elicit both positive and negative appeal in a consistent and reliable way. The solution that worked was to divide a classroom group of twenty children into two parts. Ten children were given green buttons and told to press whether they found the program "interesting or fun to watch," while the other ten children, given red buttons, were told to press whenever they found the same





In their own classroom, target-age viewers watch a test episode of *3-2-1 Contact* during a CTW-conducted research session.

program "boring or not fun to watch." Since one group of children had only the choice to respond negatively or not at all, the negative response was "okay" for them to give; these were the appointed "critics." Children were also always assured that their negative responses would be as helpful as their positive ones, and that the research sessions did not constitute a test or relate to their school work in any way. The two independent sets of instructions also provided a chance for each "side" to validate the other. This worked well, but the tedium and time delay of hand tabulations of individual responses continued to be a problem.

Subsequently, CTW, in cooperation with the Ontario Educational Communications Authority and an independent engineer, computerized this method, thus greatly simplifying both data collection and analysis. The new system, called the *Program Evaluation Analysis Computer*, or *PEAC*, is completely wireless, employing forty data collectors that look something like hand-held calculators, each with its own memory. Each child receives a hand held unit, and records the required response to a program by pressing a given button. At the end of a testing session, the data from the units are fed into a desktop computer for

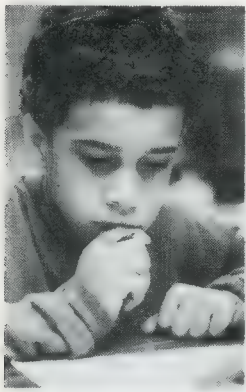
analysis according to specially designed software programs. The results can then be printed or displayed on a TV screen either numerically or in color graphics.

By means of both the mechanical and computerized Program Analyzers, researchers can present to producers graphic illustrations of the moments of high, low, and middling appeal in any test program. A Program Analyzer graph can be marked off according to program segments and events, and with the PEAC system, actually can be "drawn" on one TV screen, during the real-time progression of the test program on a screen next to it.

### **Cross-Validation and Interpretation of Appeal Measures**

Although producers appreciated and readily comprehended the visual, moment-by-moment picture of appeal that the Program Analyzer method provided, there was also a need to determine *why* children expressed the preferences they did. In addition, producers and researchers had to be able to assess what programmatic features the target audience did and did not understand, and why.





There are two ways to develop hypotheses as to why certain elements in a presentation work or do not: Researchers can ask the children themselves to articulate reasons for their responses, or can infer underlying attributes and processes. The research team was interested in developing methods that would ask children directly, in order to support and sharpen their own inferences.

The verbal abilities of 8-12 year-olds made small-group and one-on-one interviews especially attractive, and research reports and presentations to producers were enriched by comments about the programs, taken directly from children. It was helpful for both producers and researchers to know not only that a given segment was found appealing or unappealing, but also that children especially liked it "*because it was a good story*" or did not "*because they didn't show what they were talking about.*" As researchers began to make contributions towards program design, producers in turn helped to pinpoint specific research questions for such interviews.

### Additional Measures of Appeal

Aiming for a clear and consistent picture to present to producers, the research team employed additional methods to support and explain Program Analyzer findings. One method became known as "post-viewing segment voting." Each child in a group was simply given a sheet listing the segments viewed in a test program, and was asked to choose the best- and least-liked segments. Results proved to be very consistent with Program Analyzer data, and provided another look at relative appeal within a program. Similarly, cast appeal voting was employed to test CTW-produced experimental segments. Children's choices of their most and least-favorite cast members in a program, for example, helped identify the qualities they prefer in program hosts and featured guests.

Producers also faced the problem of which topics to choose for coverage in the new series. To find out which topics sparked their curiosity researchers went to children with lists of potentially intriguing questions: "Why are bubbles round?"; "How does hair grow?" Many children responded with their own original questions. Researchers also presented children with photographs on such subjects as life in outer space, dinosaurs, whales, and supertankers, with accompanying story captions, and children noted on prepared sheets whether they would or would not like to know more about each story. A study designed to stimulate channel-switching behavior provided similar information by giving children an opportunity to watch one-minute program excerpts in sets of three. Each "triplet" featured a snippet on an outer space, animal, or microorganism topic. After viewing each triplet,

children chose their most- and least-liked segments. To further stimulate program choosing among 8-12 year-olds, researchers also showed longer segments from actual programs of known appeal to the target audience, along with experimental segments. Again children were asked to choose from the set "the best" and "the worst", and were always probed following viewing to determine *why* they chose as they did.

Written instruments used for all of these methods were kept extremely simple, always designed to require minimal reading ability and adult supervision, and to maximize the individuality of children's responses. For example, researchers found it quite useful to make the response sheets in the form of closed "booklets," encouraging children to cover their selections as if they were "secret ballots." It was easy for children to mark a favorite response by circling it, and to note a least favorite by actually crossing it out. Cartoons and photographs were also added to response sheets whenever possible, to denote specific program segments or characters, or to distinguish among possible responses.

All of these methods allowed researchers to conduct group testing of entire classrooms of children and so ultimately provided producers with a large and reliable array of responses from the target audience. As the research team rounded out just one year of work on the new series, they had talked with and observed the responses of over 2,000 children in 35 studies, to science topics treated on TV.

### Taking a Look at the TV Viewing Environment of the Target Audience

Questions about what 8-12's were actually watching on TV led to specific concerns relating to series format and tone. For example, would a magazine format appeal to this age group as it had so successfully done with *Sesame Street* and *Electric Company* viewers? Were the kinds of programs enjoyed by girls different from those watched by boys? Were there differences in viewing preferences among minority and non-minority children? What types of programming could all of these children come to enjoy in common? And was this age group at all aware of any science-related programming currently available on TV? Such information was not available from regular ratings services in the detail the project team required, so the research team set about designing its own national survey of the viewing interests of 8-12 year olds.

Once again taking into consideration the special abilities and limitations of the target audience, the researchers developed a questionnaire booklet that would be fun for children to fill out, and that would require minimal reading on their part and minimal supervision from adults.



Twenty selected TV shows were identified by black and white photographs, and response options — “I have never heard of this show,” “I know about this show but don’t usually watch it,” and “I watch this show whenever I can” — were illustrated with stick-figure cartoons. There was also space for children to indicate their “one favorite show” and the TV shows that they “watched yesterday.” The questionnaire was distributed nationally through CTW regional representatives, and was administered in classrooms to a diverse sample of over 4,000 children.

The twenty selected shows in the booklet each represented a format or subject area of interest to producers of the new series. Magazine/variety shows, situation comedies, action/adventures, game shows, and PBS children’s shows were in the line-up along with science and science-fiction programs. Not surprising to producers or researchers, the lowest awareness and frequency of viewing among the twenty shows came in response to the science shows.

The staff knew that 8-12 year-olds would have some viewing interests in common, but it was not prepared for the extent of that commonality. On the “name your favorite show” item, for which children could give absolutely any response, only seven shows accounted for over half of all the nominations among 4,148 children. The top five favorites in the spring of 1978 were *Charlie’s Angels*, *Happy Days*, *Incredible Hulk*, *Hardy Boys*, and *Baby, I’m Back*. It was a group of prime-time viewers with adult-like tastes that the producers would have to woo with the new series. It was clear that the 8-12 year-olds would demand a highly sophisticated production judged primarily for its entertainment value. The question persisted: how would these values interface with the need to cover the complex content areas of science and technology at an appropriate conceptual level for 8-12 year-olds?

In the middle range of favorite shows, below the “universal” favorites, significant sex and ethnic differences emerged from this *TV Interest Survey*. Girls tended to list as favorites, shows featuring warm human relationships and family settings: *Little House on the Prairie* and *Eight is Enough*, for example. Boys favored action/adventures such as *Spiderman*, and science-fiction shows such as *Star Trek* and *Project UFO*. The girls in the target audience appeared to be less inclined to watch programs that were science-or science-fiction-related. Such sex differences were also emerging from various appeal studies with striking consistency. For example, furry animals emerged in many studies as a “girls” subject, while anything technological such as astronauts, was “for boys.” It would be a prime challenge to win the girls to the new series by folding elements that they liked into subjects that they did not ordinarily choose, without perpetuating

stereotyped preferences.

It was clear furthermore, that girls preferred shows with strong female lead characters, and that boys likewise preferred shows featuring male leads. In addition, the network sit-coms that featured black families were highly favored in predominantly black classrooms.

Producers had recognized early on the need for strong role models in the new series, but now the effort to find role models who would appeal especially to girls and minority children was strongly supported by formative research. One fortunate finding was that while strong female role models did appeal to girls, they were not necessarily a turn-off to boys. This was quite helpful as we looked for attributes that would both fulfill series objectives and appeal across the target audience.

Finally, the *TV Interest Survey* documented a trend that was beginning to emerge from the researchers’ other studies of appeal and comprehension: The 8-12 year-olds were especially attracted to plotted stories, and less so to magazine/variety formats. Producers and researchers grappled with a dilemma: How could the new series maintain the flexibility and educational clarity that a segmented magazine could provide, but still appeal to an audience of plotted story fans?

### Assembling the Answers: the Picture Comes into Focus

As CTW moved towards the production of test segments at the end of a full year of research and development, a clear picture of the target audience was beginning to emerge. It was becoming evident for example that the 8-12 year olds were extremely literal in their approach to the world around them. When the research team interviewed children to get some impressions of their knowledge and concern for environmental issues, they found that the children’s thinking was generally limited to very individual, personal experiences. Children did not grasp the connection between their own families’ use of energy, for instance, and national or world-wide energy shortages. We found in general that most 8-12 year-olds had little if any knowledge about anything that was not immediately accessible and visible to them such as distant stars and planets, or the microscopic and atomic worlds. Many revealed little understanding of scientific terminology which many adults take for granted: meter, lightyear, atom, cell.

Yet these children were clearly concerned about and fascinated by an impressive array of subjects. When given the opportunity, they articulated scores of questions about the human body: “why do people get sick?”; “how does your body know when it’s time to grow?” They viewed





with excitement filmed images of erupting volcanoes, wanting to know what would happen if people or animals were nearby. They came up with lists of questions about animals: “how is a chimpanzee smarter than a porpoise?”; “how can a deer run so fast?”. And they were captivated by the true story of a baby whale that dies in captivity, apparently sensing the complexity and the emotional dimension of the whales’ — and the scientists’ — problem.

They also showed a consistent fascination with limits and extremes — of size, “who is the tallest man or woman in the world”, of temperature “how hot is a volcano?”; and they would remember dimensions of 80-foot pizzas and 200-ton whales with startling regularity.

They wanted to know about a wide range of the natural phenomena and man-made objects with which they came into contact regularly: “Why did the world have to be round?” “Why does water turn to ice?” “How do you make paper, chalk, glass, cartoon characters, telephones, buildings . . . ?” “How does a calculator, camera, lightbulb, magnet, clock, or TV work?” And they made it very clear that they wanted to *see* for themselves the answers to all these questions. When a film or TV segment gave clear *visual* explanations and examples of scientific concepts and processes, the children not only understood a great deal, they enjoyed more what they were watching. These 8-12 year-olds were proving to be the ultimate scientific skeptics: for them seeing was an absolute pre-requisite for believing.

The target audience was also notably concerned about their own and others’ *competence*. They particularly enjoyed program segments and films that showed their peer group members “knowing just what to do or say.” They looked for evidence of social acceptability in characters and hosts in all programming — in familiar commercial fare as well as in test segments that were totally new to them.

### Data Based Guidelines for Production

The research team was thus able to provide for producers a data-based set of guidelines for the production of the new series. Certain elements appeared to enhance both appeal and comprehension. Prior knowledge on the part of the children could not be assumed for many areas of science. Any technical terms had to be clearly defined in the audio track. Visuals would have to carry much of the information; children remembered much of what they saw and little of what they heard. Vivid pictures and natural sync sound seemed to give children a sense of “presence” or “being there,” seeing things that they ordinarily would not have had a chance to witness.

Most interesting, perhaps, was the recurring discovery that stories — both fictional plotted

stories and true stories such as those related by documentaries — captured and held children’s attention better than any other form. Children could recite whole segments of dialogue and complete sequences of events after watching such pieces, much as they would excitedly retell all of last night’s *Mork and Mindy* or *Charlie’s Angels*. The decision was made early in the development of *3-2-1 Contact* to include a plotted serial in the series. Now it appeared that the other segments in the show could also have the structure of stories. Researchers found that 8-12 year-olds could and would watch and understand much longer segments, if those segments followed a clear dramatic line. Children were interested in serious stories—for example, those that dealt with the impact of technology or scientific phenomena on living things, such as a documentary about a group of young people learning to master the wilderness on an Outward Bound expedition.

There was clearly an audience out there ready to absorb a good deal of serious information about the world. The children did not care so much that it was called “science,” as they did that they might find out how it all worked, what exactly it looked like, and how it might affect them.

### Reporting to Project Staff

The *3-2-1 Contact* research team has now produced over fifty non-technical formative research reports which give the staff quick rundowns of methods, data, and implications for programming decisions. The reports are always filled with children’s comments about what they have seen (from, “Can’t we see more?” to, “That stunk!”), and contain as much supporting data as might be meaningful — *Program Analyzer* graphs, tables of segment and cast appeal voting and so on. More lengthy reports, such as those on the *TV Interest Survey* and on the two phases of test show evaluations, have more general application, and are distributed to interested professionals outside of CTW as well.

All of these written reports form the basis for in-house presentations by the research team to producers and advisors. Here the emphasis is on suggestions for improvements in the show, and on the next steps for production and the next questions to be pursued by research. Such face-to-face encounters often are the most valuable to the production-research relationship. They include hallway dialogues and consultations in editing rooms, and, over two years into the development of *3-2-1 Contact*, have helped producers to understand and share the concerns of the research team for children, and caused researchers to be sensitive to the needs and capabilities of the creative staff.



## The Ongoing Role of Formative Evaluation

By May of 1979 there were five test shows ready for evaluation by the true experts in all of this—8-12 year-old children. In two phases, the research team set out for New Jersey, Tennessee, Mississippi, Texas, Illinois, and California, with the test shows and a set of research methods including the Program Analyzer technique, now computerized, the small-group interviews, post-viewing segment and cast appeal voting, program comparison voting, and a newly designed *Teacher Case Study*, aimed at observing the use of 3-2-1 *Contact* in actual classrooms, and at getting input from teachers themselves on the content and format of the series and its prototype *Teacher's Guide*.

The show's drawing power at home was measured as well, via Warner Communications' 2-way QUBE cable system in Columbus, Ohio. A sample of 737 5-15 year-olds was recruited by telephone and invited to watch and respond to two 3-2-1 *Contact* shows on their home TV sets. Fifty-six percent of the recruited sample did tune in 1 show; 30% watched both.

By summer's end the research team had seen over 2,000 children, bringing the grand total of children consulted to over 10,000. Together with a content staff of science experts, the researchers draw upon their intimate acquaintance with the target audience to provide continuing recommendations for the design of the series. Researchers provide insights about the target audience to producers and writers before film is shot and tape produced, and afterwards, as pieces are edited and assembled. There are difficulties inherent in providing such input, however.

As the project expanded into its production phase, for example, dozens of new staff members were brought on board, many of whom had never worked with children, with science, or with formative researchers. The research team is continually faced with the challenge of communicating to team members two years of insights into the target audience. Sometimes we are successful, and sometimes creative decisions successfully take paths not fully endorsed by formative research.

At this writing, the evaluation of the test shows has taken place, but the shows that will be aired are not yet complete. There remain a number of key trade-offs that have not yet been fully resolved. As we observed the reactions of children to the test shows, it seemed that a gain in the entertainment value of a piece often came at the expense of explicitness in the science content.

The decision was made to structure the series around documentary film remotes that feature cast members talking to people out in the world of science, and exploring that world on behalf of the target audience. Such pieces have to be pulled

together back in the studio, much as the diverse elements in *Sesame Street* are unified by the street sequences. However, the more serious tone of these film remotes was not always followed through in the studio treatment. Legitimate concern with appearing didactic sometimes gave way to a much lighter tone that was entertaining, but not consistent with the feeling established in the documentaries.

It was also a well-motivated decision to offer children a diverse array of subjects and elements in the series, and the thirteen weekly themes, such as Communication, Growth and Decay, and Forces, provide the threads that bind the elements together. Yet there is a danger of appearing superficial within each piece, as we offer a rich and varied menu overall. A goal of the series is to encourage children to explore, to raise questions. But if, in the interest of variety and entertainment, we raise more questions than we can answer, will the show be satisfying to children?

Thus, at the end of the test show phase, we were still faced with the fundamental problem of making coherent educational points in an entertaining way. The resolution is still in process as series production takes place. Ultimate considerations about emphasis, style, and talent, for example, as well as implications of budget and time constraints are, as always, left to producers.

Yet when a producer will sit in an editing room and caution the assembled staff to, "Remember those 10-year-olds watching this at home alone," it becomes clear that formative research has served an important purpose: to introduce the audience itself into the creative process.

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# BBC Acting — The TV Norm?

By James Hindman

As a major feature of its recent semi-annual fundraising, Washington, D.C.'s public television station WETA chose to highlight its showing of the BBC four part series *Moll Flanders*. WETA's publicity and announcer-lead-in from the fundraising-set presented the BBC series as *High Drama* and *Serious Art* — the epitome of a public television station's commitment to non-commercial culture.

WETA is hardly alone in touting British-produced costume dramas as the "cream" of television fiction and the highest achievement of

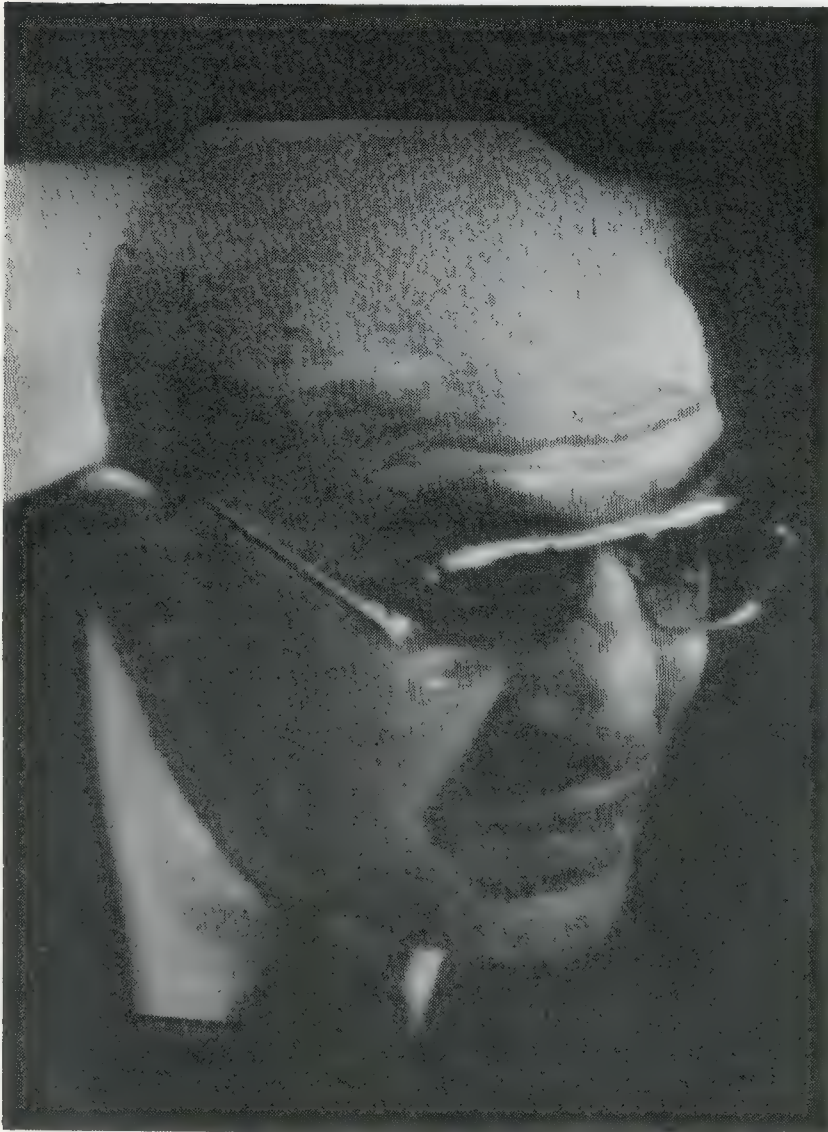
the producer's—and the actor's art. The appeal of shows like *Moll Flanders* is hard to deny: sumptuous scenery, gorgeously authentic period costumes, drawing room manners, generous flashes of bosom with wittily ribald by-play, vivid and memorable characterizations, and, above all, those wonderful accents.

The depth and richness of the acting in these BBC mini-series sets a standard that seems to dwarf American dramatic production. In contrast, U.S. sitcom and action fare appears endlessly banal and shallow. *General Hospital* and other soaps pull the viewer's stops out but lack any sophistication, edge, or wit in performance. Only those ubiquitous *Perry Mason* reruns have a comparable idiosyncratic charm from the principals and quick courtroom cameos by fine Hollywood character actors (in what are now great period costumes).

The truth is that much of the power of the so-called BBC acting style derives from the fact that we seem to have nothing, really, to compare it to on American television. Our staple dramatic fare is soap opera, situation comedy, and police action shows. Serious drama has virtually disappeared from both commercial and public television since the *Visions* series was discontinued. An occasional piece by sitcom performers proving their versatility (i.e. Jean Stapleton working in the Art Carney mode) is the exception played against the rule of imported costume drama.

The power of BBC dramatic production comes both from the material (*Moll Flanders* has considerably more staying power than *The French Atlantic Affair*, as fiction and as drama) and from the quality of the performances. Even when the scripted material might be too arcane to appeal to mass audiences, (e.g. *Love of Lydia*), the sheer elegance of the BBC acting style has its own drawing power as the ratings attest. What, then, is the basis of this appeal? Is it sheer cultural snobbery, like grand opera at the Kennedy Center? Is it mainly the seductive charm of period costumes and manners? Or are English actors just better than ours?

The problem lies in defining style in TV acting: how the medium itself creates acting styles, how TV-scripts style the actor's performance, how the training of the actor creates the probable stylistic range of the TV performance. It is necessary to understand the appeal of British television acting style to evaluate its appropriateness as a standard for acting on American television.





## The BBC Style

What is the nature of the British acting style, and what is the basis for its popularity on American television? *Moll Flanders* is vintage BBC television theatre made in 1975 and recently distributed here by Time-Life Books to individual public television stations. A closer look at *Moll Flanders* will provide an illuminating contrast between British and American performance for television.

Shot on film, *Moll Flanders* situates the actors in the heart of a visual feast created by the period buildings and streets, costumes and furniture, the charm of parks, woods and baronial lawns. Much of this visual richness would have been lost on tape. The actors' filmic performance style is as much rooted in the art direction as it is in the script itself. At times the *Moll Flanders* actors almost seem like the talking mannequins at Colonial Williamsburg, saved only from cloying sentimental charm by Spartan underplaying.

The producers of *Moll* made concessions to television, especially in a strong use of close-ups in Moll's never-ending soap-style victimization and confrontation with her lovers and tormentors. Medium shots of small groupings, crowd scenes in the chaotic London streets, and long tracking shots for chases and ambling carriages open the novel up from the sentimental domestic pot-boiler which it is at base.

The direction and general scope of performances is low-key, calm, and fairly non-stylized. There is none of the campy hyperbole which afflicted the British-American film of *Moll Flanders* or Tony Richardson's sniggery *Tom Jones*. Narration, necessary to keep us up in the four one-hour segments of the production was handled quietly, using matter-of-fact titles at the start of each part. The music was built around period songs and ballads. All in all, a tasteful, subdued production design.

Because of the extended scope of the production, the pace of individual performances is leisurely. Moll herself gets to age from about 16 to 60, a real virtuoso undertaking. The episodic structure of Defoe's novel covers a great deal of ground. The script is built accordingly in short units, relating to Moll's involvement with numerous men who variously die, abandon her, run off, have her arrested, and otherwise make her life miserable. Each section (or failed romance) is exposed in the context of a period location: an inn, an early Georgian manor, a Virginia plantation house, Newgate prison, and so on.

Characters are also placed in the location context, with class distinctions and social differences developed with meticulous character business. Clichés are avoided: elaborate period bows, snuff-taking, and fan-wielding are replaced with



simple business related to buttons, hats, and wine glasses. Accordingly, the characters are humanized and amplified without a lot of frou-frou period manners.

Clearly much of the charm of BBC style lies in the characters themselves as much as in the actors. Historical material like *Moll Flanders* operates in a rich literary context that includes Dickens' London low-lives, Austin's country maidens, and so many other stock figures who have been dramatized, performed, or read about until they have a life of their own. The actor can approach the iconography of these characters with technical precision: accents, manners, movement style, period business. Such iconography can be sketchy in performance. The *Moll Flanders* cast evokes their characters' milieu without over-illustrating it. The historical tradition of English fiction and drama is an instant context that fills in the empty place of the production. A West-country face, sharing the frame with a brass candlestick, is a completed image that needs no posturing or fussiness to evoke character in a costume drama.

Because of the visual power of authentic period location, costumes and props, the BBC



producer can de-emphasize dialogue, a real advantage for Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. The narrator is eliminated and each scene pared down to basic exchanges. The reaction shot is critical in this style, and Moll's victim status is reinforced by the amount of time she is shown listening, reacting, commenting on the action through her movement in an exit or turn away from the camera.

Defoe's wit and biting social commentary is preserved in the visuals, especially in the minor characters and supporting groups that establish the social background to Moll's plight. City knights are rheumy, fat, gout-ridden, but still three-dimensional figures who play off Moll with a complete psychology. No one is bland or vacuously pretty; each face conveys an attitude about the action that enriches the texture of the scene. A parlor maid, for example, is glimpsed only briefly as she lets Moll into the hall of the first manor house we have seen, but her detached, pinched expression counterpoints Moll's sentimental evocation of memories about her first lover.

Thus a major hall-mark of the BBC style is this attention to detail in each characterization, no matter how minor. The acting is neither sentimental nor overly interpretive. Each character, each piece of action is distinct, set off, framed separately. Gradually a sense of cleanness emerges in the acting, an absence of excess, a feeling that clear choices and definitions have been made, gratuitous flourishes have been eliminated. Defoe's sanctimonious tone and constant moralizing is down-played by the tightness of the acting and directing.

On a purely technical level, these BBC actors have excellent voice training. Their English is crisp, melodious, expressive of much more nuance than conventional American. A further consequence of the vocal technique apparent in *Moll* is an extremely mobile face mask for the actor. No face in the production failed to carry a fully expressive attitude or series of attitudes. Most television and film actors work with the mouth and eyes. These sculpted faces, however, express nuances of class and attitude with sunken cheeks, beak noses, twitching chins, protruding ears, scars, scabs, and hair arranged for every effect imaginable. Even when the actor worked as a talking head, a great deal was happening from the neck up. Unlike standard American TV fare, *Moll* has none of the bland glamor or ordinary good looks of the indistinguishable groups that often create an inoffensive visual background.

The particular appeal of BBC acting style is even clearer in contrast to nearly any prime-time American produced dramatic programming. Just for the sake of comparison let us look at *The French Atlantic Affair*, a three-part dramatization of a recent best-seller produced as a made-for-TV

movie. The comparison clearly is not exact: the U.S. effort is based in a sleazy contemporary action novel; it uses stars in typical vehicle roles, and its low-budget appeal lies in the rapid action of the plot rather than the stellar performances of the actors. Such blatant differences in material are useful, however, since they vividly illustrate the different assumptions about successful TV performance which make the BBC imported acting stand out so clearly.

*The French Atlantic Affair* uses two faded second rank movie stars (Louis Jordan and Shelly Winters) and one over-exposed television fixture (Telly Savalas). The rest of the cast are pleasant, forgettable, non-entities. The real star of the show is the boat, a sleek liner seized by terrorists in an extortion plot. The other stars play their conventional fictionalized images: Jordan the elegantly worried Captain, Savalas the one-note sinister cult leader, Winters his blowsily loyal mistress. No real effort is made to individualize the rest of the characters, who are as Southern-California anonymous as the *Charlie's Angels* cast. One exception is—of all people—John Houseman in a wheelchair playing the egghead leader of an American think-tank. However, his performance is typical of the material and the medium: Professor Kingsfield resurrected with a slight retailoring.

*The French Atlantic Affair* is an action show with a large cast, several subplots, and several other exotic locations (e.g. Paris) besides the boat. Rapid cutting, up-tempo mood music (suitably electronic to match the high-tech shots of the boat), and the clicking of the digital clocks on the time bombs are what keep the material moving. The actors are secondary to the action.

What we *can* say about the acting here is that it is appropriate to the material. The stars merely manipulate their established images, creating a performance with the same mannerisms and delivery patterns that have kept them in work for years. The script and shooting style does not leave room for a great deal more individualized work. Their characters are, as noted above, mythic—based in their widely established fictionalized images. Savalas' shining dome and opaque sunglasses, Winters' fly-away hair and sagging jowls, Jordan's haunted dark eyes—each actor creates an icon which can be lighted, shot, and edited into a character: the dramatic action is elsewhere, in the fights, chases, and ticking of the bombs. The other actors are given even less to do and say (dialogue is held to an absolute minimum in this sort of material); they are grouped and shot to create the illusion that there are no empty spaces on the set and in the show.

The point of our comparison is not that the acting in *Moll Flanders* is better than that in *The French Atlantic Affair*, which it is, but that the acting in both productions is more or less suitable to the





material. Each program is made within a pre-existing set of conventions and expectations. BBC acting in *The French Atlantic Affair* would be ludicrous, given the components and style of an American action show. The boat would sink under the weight of all that ponderousness. The reverse would produce the simple-minded smarminess of the earlier film of *Moll Flanders*.

## Toward a Theory of TV Acting

Where does good TV acting come from? Is it merely a part of a continuum of great performing, running from Verdi opera through dinner theatre to local news announcing? Is the stage the basis of the actor's art, TV merely a recording device? I would argue, no. Performance exists and has reality only in the circumstances of the production itself. TV acting has evolved as a separate style and way of working that has little to do with the art of the stage. Experience in the latter will clearly enrich the former, but the differences in the way the actor must work in each medium far outweigh the similarities. The style of acting that has emerged on American TV is a logical outgrowth of practices in the medium and is generally suited to the formats it serves.

*An actor, as part of his or her theatrical equipment, must acquire the capacity to adapt to the special circumstances and changing conditions that confront him or her with each new engagement. He must be able to modify the volume, the style and the very nature of his performance so as to achieve the same dramatic and emotional effect in an auditorium that seats 60 or 600 or 6000, before audiences that may vary radically in age, education, sophistication and attitude.*

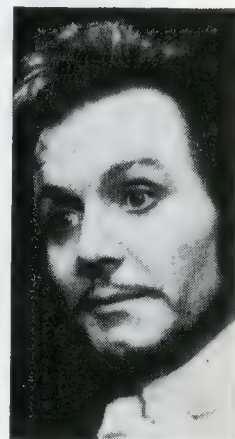
*Compared to this, adaptation to the camera lens is child's play. I know of no good actor who, under the guidance of a sensitive and knowledgeable director, has been unable to make this adjustment in a matter of hours.*

*John Houseman, "Is TV Acting Inferior?"  
TV Guide, Sept. 1-7, 1979, p. 24*

Now well-known to the TV-watching public as Professor Kingsfield in *The Paper Chase*, John Houseman has had an eminent career as an actor, director, and teacher. Ironically, wide recognition of his work has not come until late in his life with the success of his crochety, Olympian sitcom character. He points with some pride to his work in training the present generation of successful young stars in a variety of media: Robin Williams, Patti LuPone, Kevin Kline. The Drama Division at Julliard, which he helped to found in 1969, ranks as probably the best performance training center in America.

Houseman argues that there is nothing inherently inferior about acting on television to, say, acting at Lincoln Center. The technical and commercial demands of the medium itself create the difference in style between TV and the stage or TV and movies. In the statement cited above, Houseman suggests that a well trained actor, presumably Julliard-trained, can handle any of it.

The obvious question that remains is, why the great discrepancy in acting styles on commercial television? Why is there such a vast difference in actors' effectiveness, over-and-above the clear differences in material, between prime-time shows in the same slots? Alan Alda and the *M.A.S.H.* crowd hold us season after season, while the quick turnover of sitcoms every Fall leaves few memorable performances. The overwhelming contrast between home-grown material and imported costume dramas has already been noted. Is it merely that we have a huge reservoir of poorly-trained, low-talent actors all scrambling for jobs? Houseman appears to say so, seemingly suggesting that they all should have gone to Julliard. After all, Mork did.



*It was our mission, (at Julliard), I felt, to train actors: the various paths along which they might be led by the chances of show business and/or their own individual talents were not our concern. Broadway, regional theater, repertory, musical theater, avant-garde theater, dinner theater, feature films, soap opera, situation comedies, films for TV—they all call for the same thing: artists so well trained that they are capable of meeting whatever challenges they may encounter in their careers.*

Houseman argues here that basically all acting is the same, only the circumstances change. The TV actor, therefore has merely to draw on the flexibility and professionalism implanted in her or his training to respond to the technical demands of the video medium. On the face of it, Houseman's argument seems fatuous: like the statement that eating is essentially the same act, changing only with the menu and the circumstances of the meal. Only a hopeless gourmand could so sweep away the distinctions that ensure the cook a living.

Houseman does acknowledge, secondarily, the multitude of circumstances that make television acting an overwhelming challenge for the most versatile of actors: the reduced scale of performance; the necessary collaboration with director, producer, editor; the effect of the electronic image; the pedestrian circumstances of viewing. A great deal can and should be made of these exacting technical requirements on the self-created art of the actor (see the extended discussion in the previous *Televisions* article "The



Quality of TV Acting" and in the Hastings House book *TV Acting: A Manual for Camera Performance*.)

Television acting must be recognized as a highly specialized craft. Any performance exists in the circumstances of production as the creation and result of a complex series of *adjustments* by the actor. Unlike Houseman I would argue that this is what TV acting is: adjustments to script, to format, to the camera and the mike, to the endless number of personnel who help to shape the performance. The independently produced PBS documentary *Sitcom* had a wonderfully illustrative sequence of *Garry Marshall* rehearsing Robin Williams, with Marshall shaping and adjusting the spontaneous play of Mork's performance to fit the demands of the studio.

The television actor does not work for the medium, or in front of the medium, as though the cameras were just one more audience like those at Melody Fare Dinner Theater or at Arena Stage. In reality, the actor works *in* the medium, in an all encompassing process which seriously curtails and controls the creative art of acting. As *Sitcom* demonstrated, the TV actor's work is highly fragmented, largely dependent on others, and finally occurring at some distance from its source—the actor. Williams' wittily impulsive business for Mork is broken down into its various components (shot, reaction shot, line, bit of business) and then reassembled on the screen, with some inevitable loss of quality, some unavoidable distortion.

In any format, certain realities place limits on what the TV actor may achieve. The major characteristic of most formats is brevity. The television image itself reduces the visual information available to the audience in other performing media. The actor must make a vivid impression quickly, while still working within a conversational scale appropriate to the viewer's living-room. The cutting rhythm is faster on TV than in film, to compensate in part for the frozen camera.

The actor works in smaller units of visual information. The commercial realities of broadcast television keep shows fragmented with ads and shorter rather than longer, making the actor achieve more in less time.

Television's reduction of time, information, and detail forces the effective TV actor to concentrate the impact of the performance into a few, carefully chosen strategies. The simplicity and vividness of the characterizations that result can make even the 30 second dramatized commercial a memorable performance. A good performance in a commercial or a sitcom is meticulously timed, up-tempo, packed with hidden energy, and as crisp as the material allows. As a result, these performances can be repeated over and over until the endless repetition of reruns exhausts all but the truly devoted viewer. The charm of familiarity even gives the actors and

material added mileage—hence the longevity of "Startrek," "Lucy," and "Charmin."

Even in miniaturized form (such as the commercial), the prototype of nearly all television formats is the drama. English pundit/critic Martin Esslin develops this thesis whimsically, but convincingly in "Aristotle and the Advertizers," an essay in a recent *Kenyon Review*. Esslin argues that the individual dilemma which forms the nucleus of the usual fictionalized commercial is as potentially dramatic as Sophocles. Such commercials develop, with astounding efficiency and speed, a conflicted situation which must be resolved, through the advertizer's product or service, to bring the much-needed changes in the central character's life. Marriages are saved, sexual marketability restored, and reputations redeemed dozens of times in the course of an evening of prime-time television advertising.

By extending Esslin's argument slightly we can see that even news and information formats are built around the dramatic form. The basis of the conflict is confrontation: *Meet the Press* gives the viewer the power of showdowns with public figures, and in the evening news we confront the day's excitement with the vividly-individualized, fixed characters of the anchor team. Sports and live event coverage also carry the dramatic sub-

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## Where Do TV Actors Come From?

TV acting style is clearly a function of the nature of the medium: its screen image quality, its formats, economic pressures, its directing and editing styles. Actors merely respond to these realities, and they work within them as creatively as they are able to. But the actor also brings a vital component to any TV performance: training, experience, and expectations about what kind of work is possible on TV.

American actor training is, in contrast to European and Eastern practices, quite haphazard. With a few rare exceptions like Juilliard, conservatory training is simply not available here. The inherent limitations of any college curriculum make thorough acting classes extremely difficult to find. Over 1500 colleges and universities offer some kind of acting class, but only a handful (less than 15) dare to pretend that they offer "professional training."

Specialized studio training for actors is widely available in New York. However, the quality of



structure of protagonist/antagonist and plotted action. Olympic contests and moon-landings merge with political demonstrations. Drama carries the medium.

Accordingly, TV performers develop a style to accommodate the concentrated subliminal dramatic structures typical of the medium. In most cases, TV characters are considerably more vivid than the plots they appear in. In the miniature dramas of commercials there is no time to develop plot beyond the rudimentary formula of the dramatic situation. Sitcom and action shows have recycled plot possibilities so many times that most plots are extremely conventionalized and familiar. Only situation and location (e.g. *Charlie's Angels* take on a disco roller skating case in Venice) can pep up the plots. There is an advantage in most formats to such recognizable material, essentially because the viewer is reassured with the familiar. Visuals and performances all operate on the viewer within the conventions of the familiar: "new" programming can be built around a change in costuming, locale, or a topical issue. The *Charlie's Angels* show built around roller disco used the same tired kidnap plot linking the rebellious daughter of the socialite with the handsome sports pro, with lots of gorgeous skating footage.



such training varies enormously from one studio to another, from one teacher to another. Each studio has its own particular patented approach which may or may not have the general applicability needed for professional talent of wide range. Even the established schools like the H. B. Studio, for example, featuring the respected teaching of Herbert Bergdorf and Uta Hagen, produce a readily identifiable, internally-oriented actor.

Los Angeles breeds acting schools like fast food chain franchises. Recent publicity on the fraud, deceit, and sexual exploitation rampant among "professional" acting teachers on both coasts has produced some movement toward regulation within the teaching industry itself as well as some governmental policing. Nevertheless, the prospect of picking a private acting teacher or school in the teeming studio jungle is a daunting one.

Acquiring training in television performance is an additional problem for the beginning or exclusively stage-trained actor. Several universities—notably American University in Washington, D.C., N.Y.U., U.C.L.A., and U.S.C. — have begun to develop TV acting programs jointly through theatre and television departments. Other colleges may offer one on-camera broadcast journalism course or perhaps a tentative tour

of soap-opera formats for drama students. Nevertheless, equipment is expensive, resources are quite limited, and the small student population that can be taught in an on-camera class makes such courses economically unfeasible.

With the development of inexpensive consumer video, there has been a mushrooming of commercially taught TV performance classes in New York and Los Angeles. Current New York trade papers list more than ten operations purporting to teach soap, commercial and announcing skills to the uninitiated on "the latest" equipment. Instructors advertise impressive commercial credits. Placement of graduates, however, is not touted with quite as much enthusiasm.

In reality, most TV actors are trained on-the-job. They are hired a second time if they are flexible enough to adapt to the medium easily and if, as Houseman suggests, they happen to get a patient, sensitive director who will ground them in the basics. Since commercial pressures foreshorten rehearsal, it is inevitable that most TV actors end up with a limited range of castability and effective performance, no matter how extensive their credits. Once the working actor finds the right combination of image and type, she or he tends to be re-used in the same narrow range of roles.

The problem is compounded by standard cast-



Actors often work with plots that are recycled, reduced or dressed up from a basic formula, and must try to compensate by making a vivid impact on the viewer with their performance. Successful ad, action or sitcom performances are quirky, sharp-edged, taut. News performers and announcers act out a persona from a few basic mannerisms: rising inflection, eye contact, the placement of energy in one strong body part (e.g. chest, jaw, forehead).

Under these circumstances, the successful actor has to produce more than a cliché character, familiar and forgettable. Laverne, Shirley, and the "clean-up-the-counter" lady live much longer lives than the single show or spot we see them in each time. In each case the actor has voice and body business that encapsulates an attitude that the viewer instantly recognizes and probably identifies with: defiant, city-wise, one-up, frightened beneath the surface. Martin Esslin claims that such characters are *mythic*, that they have a larger existence than the material they exist in. Successful actors in commercial formats create "fictions . . . which embody the essential, livid reality of a culture and society." Robert Young's medical persona is clearly one such mythic character, powerful enough to save a life or sell

coffee, no matter how long he has been around. The prosecutorial Mike Wallace, the genially bumbling but sharp-edged Dan Schorr: these performance personalities are by now codified fictions with more power than the news they present. These actors have learned to speak to us through the brevity and formulas of the medium, to represent the truths of our lives with the reassuring touchstone of familiar images and the comfort of an ongoing, individualized human presence. They are more than guests in our homes, they are old friends with whom we have shared our lives.

Television has, according to John Houseman, a "short emotional curve," especially in comparison to movies or plays. Not only are TV formats reduced and compacted, but the basic structural unit of television is generally briefer than its counterpart in other media. The talking heads which are television's staple visual information lend themselves to conversation/confrontation/reaction, a fairly limited range of dramatic action. Accordingly, the actor must build up a simple pattern of business that can reappear consistently. At the same time, the brief scene unit must be subdivided shot-by-shot for the actor to structure development of objectives. Commercial formats



ing practices. Commercial and spot work remains the easiest way into the union rolls and to high-visibility, heavy-exposure TV performance. Professional models are the main pool of talent used to cast commercials. Models market image; they have no need for serious voice and body movement training. With little or no dramatic work in their background, such performers make it on looks, wardrobe, and a few marketable personality characteristics. Their talents and training are those of an on-camera image maker rather than those of an actor. The shallow performances and characterizations they create are triumphs of the editor's and director's art rather than the culmination of the craft and training of an actor.

The BBC costume drama so popular in the U.S. works within an entirely different sort of system — not necessarily better from the actor's perspective, but different. Most English acting training is based in the conservatory model (which operates as a complete training curriculum without the liberal arts pretensions of American college programs). Fewer students are admitted, fewer finish, and those who do graduate are much more thoroughly trained than their American counterparts. The prestige programs like Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts virtually guarantee their alumni steady work.

Those actors who skip the conservatory can



require quick change and growth in the performance, accomplished in brief scenes fragmented into briefer shots.

American television acting has much room for improvement. Traditional dramatic training would extend the actor's available performance range and discourage the debilitating practice of commercial typing that locks the actor into a limited career. Training in the specialized skills needed for TV work would expand the employability of theatre-oriented actors. The evolution of new formats, not so rigidly conventionalized in script and character, may be encouraged by the expanded use of actors in non-broadcast work. In the future the varied facets of American television should produce richer acting and a more sophisticated use of performance in the medium.

Is there a norm for American TV acting? The performance levels established on *Moll Flanders* and *The French Atlantic Affair* are quite good for the material that is presented in each case. Both the American cast and its British counterpart fail to break ground in any meaningful way in the scope and range of TV performance. The grand style of BBC costume drama and the slick style of prime-time U.S. commercial fare are, in each case, an

adjustment to the viewers' expectations and to the parameters-of-the-possible in production circumstances. TV acting will mature as the medium itself does, with new audiences, specialized services, innovative formats. In the mean time the individual performance must be judged in the context of its production, as a skilled adjustment by the actor to the material, the audience, and the broadcast medium itself.

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get a solid foundation of on-stage experience in the regional repertory theatres that supply London with a steady stream of experienced actors. These theatres play a mix of classics and modern material, rooting the actor in a solid technical approach to period, manners, language, and style. The performer gets a heavy emphasis on vocal and movement training through this initial work experience that includes an apprentice-like collaboration with older actors. As jobs open in London, the luckier, more aggressive, occasionally more talented ones circulate into the currently thriving West End and the showcase fringe theatres. In tighter times, regional theatres and festivals offer a potential fall-back position. Unemployment is high, but proportionally much lower in the heavily subsidized British theatre than in the American theatre.

The BBC thus has a much larger pool of highly trained and talented actors to draw from than does their American counterparts. BBC salaries are notoriously low, even for British actors of star rank: their public relations office recently quoted figures of \$250 to \$350 per week, with no residual arrangements. As a result, their actors turn over much more rapidly in television casting. There is no real British TV acting profession in the American sense, except for a few long-lived ITV personalities. The actor's base is still in the theatre—in this case, in the most vital

theatre in the English-speaking world. Stage actors occasionally work for TV, as a rent-paying tiding-over between engagements. More accurately they work for a variety of BBC producer-directors, who have (according to the BBC front office) virtual autonomy in casting. This system assures a turnover of well-trained, widely experienced actors of every age and type who have no financial stake in a permanent TV career.

Geographic factors add to this talent pool. London is the artistic and professional center of British performing arts. Careers are launched and sustained in the provinces, but they are crowned by London successes. Even out-of-the-way location work is cast from the central London talent pool which is naturally theatre oriented. There is no Los Angeles-New York schizophrenia to split British TV and movies casting directors off from their traditional base in the theatre. The great theatre-trained character actors who sustained Hollywood from the 'twenties' through the 'fifties' have long since died off, leaving narrowly-based screen actors who lack the rich background of repertory actors. Because British public television draws from a single source for talent, they neither give nor require specialized television training. Those actors who handle the camera well get cast; their versatility and range of experience is expected to carry them through.



# Televisions Index

## An Index by Subject and by Issue from 1973-1979

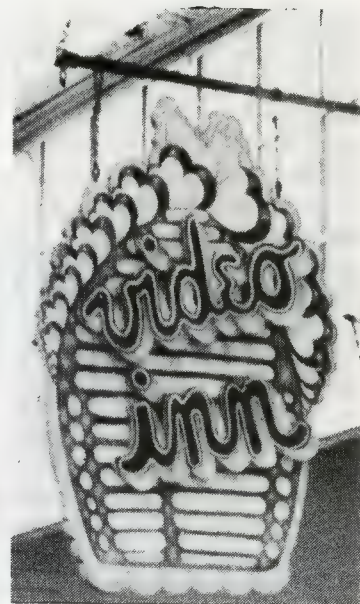
### Interviews

- Richard Wiley, FCC Chairman. 1(4)  
 Tim O'Hara, Theta-Com, Inc. 1(4)  
 Theodore Ledbetter, Urban Communications Group. 1(4)  
 Clay Whitehead, Office of Telecommunications Policy. 2(1)  
 Donna Allen, editor, *Media Report to Women*. 3(1)  
 Robert Choate, Council on Children, Media and Merchandising. 5(1)  
 Bruce Kurtz, author, *Spots*. 5(2)  
 Chloe Aaron, Vice-President of Programming, PBS. 5(2)  
 Michael Arlen, *New Yorker Magazine*. 5(3)  
 Carol Brandenburg and David Loxton, WNET-TV Laboratory 6(1)  
 Ed Kuhlman, Citizens Communications Center. 6(1)  
 Jon Alpert, Downtown Community Television. 6(2)  
 Erik Barnouw, author, *Tube of Plenty, The Sponsor*. 4(3)



### Arts

- Video Improvisation, Video Performance. 1(4)  
 Experimental Television Center Explores Video As Art in Binghamton. 2(1)  
 Florence Video Group Opens First U.S. Video Show. 2(2)  
 Video In Museums: Gadgetry or Imagery? Jacques Lipchitz Talks Back From the Screen. 3(1)  
 Video Arts: The Medium of Television. Explorations in Video Arts. 3(1)  
 Bringing the Museum Home: Video In Museums. 3(2)  
 Video In Museums. 3(3)  
 John Baldessari. 3(3)  
 Joan Logue 3(3)  
 Southland Video Anthology 3(3)  
 One Woman Effort Puts Video In San Francisco Arts Festival. 3(4)  
 International Video Arrives in Berlin. 3(4)  
 Art Shorts. 3(4)  
 Nationwide Art Series on Cable Explores New Distribution Concept: Cable Arts Foundation. 4(1)  
 San Francisco Museum Learns How to Show Video. 4(1)  
 Art Shorts, 4(1)  
 Taping Sacred Ants. 4(2)  
 Video Performance In San Francisco. 4(2)  
 The Sao Paulo Bienal International Exhibitions and U.S. Video Art. 5(1)  
*Good Night, Good Morning.* (Joan Jonas) 5(1)  
*May Windows* (Joan Jonas) 5(1)  
*Spots: The Popular Art of American Television Commercials.* (Bruce Kurtz)  
 Video Portraits by John Hunt. 5(3)  
 Video Art: Spain and Syracuse, N.Y. 5(4)  
*Structural Realism* (Nancy Holt) 5(4)  
*Marketing Live From Lincoln Center*, 5(4)  
 Squat. 6(1)  
 Making Video Dance: Ballanchine, Cunningham, and Twyla Tharp. 6(1)  
 New Access To Regional Editing Centers: Syracuse, San Francisco, Chicago and Missoula. 6(2)  
 Artists Television Network: Cable SOHO. 6(2)  
 A Bill Wegman Retrospective: Tests, Collisions and Affinities. 6(2)  
 Lessons in TV Portraiture: A Review of the *Writers in America Series*. 6(2)  
 Distribution: Galleries, Museums and Media Centers. 6(3)  
 Programs On The Visual Arts. 7(1)  
 Keeping It In Perspective: Educators Use Video Modeling for Environmental Design. 4(3)





# Televisions Index

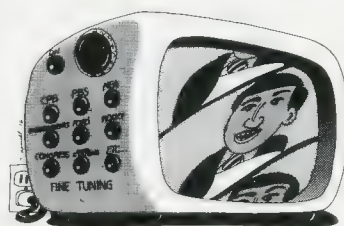
## Satellites

ATS Satellite Delivers Health Experiments. 2(2)  
 U.S. and Canadian Satellite Will Focus On Education Health Utilization. 3(1)  
 New Public Service Satellite Consortium. 3(1)  
 Rocky Mountain Satellite: Pork Barrel In The Sky. 3(3)  
 Satellites Defended. 3(4)  
 Should People Fight For Satellites? 4(1)  
 Public Interest Satellite Association. (PISA) 4(1)  
 HBO Flirts With TV Diversity As Satellite Network Opens. 4(1)  
 PISA Surveys 1500 Groups On Satellites. 4(2)  
 The Public Push In Satellites and NASA's New Role In R&D. 5(2)  
 PBS Satellite Notes. 6(3)  
 NASA Leaves Indira Gandhi A Propaganda Tool. Goals of Satellite Experiment are Corrupted. 4(3)

## Public Television

Revamped *Feeling Good* Returns to PBS. 3(2)  
 The Programming Structure of Public Broadcasting. Exploring the Public Air. 3(3)  
 The Trouble With PBS... 3(3)  
 Getting Into PBS: Independents Make Inroads on National Programming. 3(3)  
 The Station Program Co-Op. 3(3)  
 Public Television Library. 3(4)  
 PBS Worries Over Corporate Underwriters. 3(4)  
 CPB Moves In Education Role. 3(4)  
 Woman Cooking, Woman Spending, But Not *Woman Alive*. 4(1)

CPB Education Office. 4(1)  
 VT On TV Time Scan. 4(2)  
 VTR Airs 13 New Shows By Independents and Packages Past Series. 4(2)  
 Does Target Programming Serve Minorities. 4(2)  
 Interview: Chloe Aaron, Vice-President Programming, PBS. 5(2)  
 WNET Wins Ford/NEA Documentary Fund. 5(3)  
 DC's WETA Serving the Public? 6(1)  
 CPB Appropriations Bill Promises Extensive Changes For Public TV. 6(1)  
 Interview: Carole Brandenburg and David Loxton. WNET/13 TV Lab. 6(1)



PBS Satellite Notes. 6(3)  
 Independent Producers in Public TV. (A study for the Carnegie II Commission) 6(4)  
 Public TV Minority Training Grants. 7(1)  
 Broadcast Access: Historic PTV License Decision in Alabama. 3(1)  
 PBS Enters Video Marketing. 3(1)  
 Citizens Group Seeks More TV Public Affairs Programming. 4(1)  
 Public Affairs National Feed. 6(2)  
 PBS News Planners Reinvent the Wheel. 4(3)

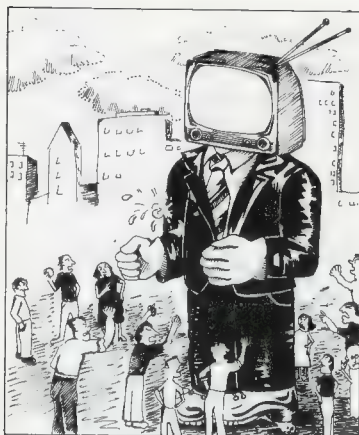
## Citizen Action

Community Monitors Government. 1(1)  
 Survival Information Project. 1(1)  
 Women Organize Around Cable TV. 1(2)  
 TV Surveillance/Washington, D.C. 1(2)  
 D.C. Video Coalition Set For Home Rule Tapes. 1(3)  
 Community Newstapes: Antidote to TV News. 1(3)  
 Theory and Practice of Community Video. Part I. 1(3) Part II. 1(4) Part III. 2(2)  
 Alaska's Sky River Project: Community Use of Video and Film. 2(1)  
 Newest Public Interest Campaign: Citizen Input in Technology Assessment. 2(1)  
 Video Helps U.S./Welsh Miners. 2(2)  
 Kodak Advice Could Really Help Workers. 2(2)  
 Broadcast Access: Historic PTV License Decision in Alabama. 3(1)  
 Portland Oregon Project Focuses On Neighborhood. 3(2)  
 San Jose Access. 3(2)  
 FCC Passes Policy on Citizen Agreement. 3(3)  
 Public Interest Communications Law Firms: The Media Access Project and Citizens Communications Center. 3(3)  
 Court Video vs. The Poor. 4(1)  
 Should People Fight For Satellites. 4(1)  
 Public Interest Satellite Association. 4(1)  
 Public Service Announcements. (PSA's) 4(1)  
 Free Speech Messages (FSM's) 4(1)  
 D.C. Group Wins WMAL Transfer Challenge. 4(1)





# Televisions Index



Woman's Task Force Indicts  
CPB Record On Hiring and  
Programming. 4(1)  
Citizens Group Seeks More TV  
Public Affairs Programming.  
4(1)  
The True Story of An Editorial  
Reply. 5(1)  
Interview: Robert Choate,  
Council on Children, Media  
and Merchandising. 5(1)  
Busing and Video Process:  
School Desegregation and  
Boston Media. 5(1)  
The Public Push in Satellites  
and NASA's New Role in  
R&D. 5(2)  
Lessons In Viewer Sponsored  
TV: Studying 10 years of LA's  
Late KVST-68 5(3)  
Speak Out Seattle. 5(4)  
Seven Years of Public Access:  
100 Active Access Centers.  
Four Profiles: Reading PA;  
Danbury, CT; York, PA; and  
Marin, CA. 5(4)  
Public Affairs National Feed.  
6(2)  
CETA Staffs Video Groups  
Across the Country:  
Background and Five  
Profiles. 6(2)  
Banning TV Advertising For  
Kids: Pro's and No's Muster  
Forces for Hearings. VI, 3  
Rural Cable TV Co-Operative.  
7(1)  
Community media 7(1)  
PTV Minority Training Grants.  
7(1)

## Women & Minorities

Women Organize Around  
Cable TV. 1(2)  
Interview; Theodore Ledbetter,  
Urban Communications  
Group. 1(4)  
Theory and Practice of  
Community Video, Part II.  
Video Memphis- Memphis  
Women's Channel. 1(4)  
Local D. C. Group Fights  
WMAL Sale. 2(1)  
Women's Media. 2(2)  
Feminist Media Conference.  
3(1)  
Women's Cable Channel,  
Albany N.Y. 3(1)  
Interview: Donna Allen,  
Editor, *Media Report to  
Women*. 3(1)  
National Black Media  
Coalition. 3(1)  
New York Women's Video  
Festival Runs For Three  
Weeks. 3(2)  
NSF Funds Study On Blacks  
and TV. 3(2)  
Nine Cities Share VideoLetters.  
3(4)  
Court Video vs. The Poor. 4(1)  
Woman Cooking, Woman  
Spending, but Not *Woman  
Alive*. 4(1)  
Woman's Task Force Indicts  
CPB Record on Hiring &  
Programming. 4(1)  
Does Target Programming  
Serve Minorities. 4(2)  
DC's WETA Serving the  
Public? 6(1)  
Minority Cable. 6(3)  
Public TV Minority Training  
Grants. 7(1)  
**Libraries & Education**  
Library Notes. 2(2)  
Libraries & Education. 3(1)  
Mobile Library's Media  
Program. 3(2)  
UNET and the Problem of  
Distribution. 3(2)  
ALA's Cable/Video Section.  
3(3)  
Video Teaching: Learning  
Video. 3(4)  
A Look At Video and The  
Classroom. 3(4)

Kids Don't Like Pointless  
Games: Creative Video Uses.  
3(4)  
Real-Life Soap Opera Kids  
Produce Themselves: Details  
of an Intimate Production.  
3(4)  
Seeing Ourselves To Change  
Ourselves: Self Image Video  
Work Teaches Teachers. 3(4)  
CPB Moves In Education Role.  
3(4)  
California Video Resources  
Project (CVRP). 3(4)  
Children's TV Studies Report:  
Violence, Sex Roles and  
Sugar Ads. 4(1)  
Broadcast Schools Train Too  
Many Students For the  
Wrong Jobs. 4(1)  
CPB Education Office. 4(1)  
Video/Cable Gains Power In  
New ALA Structure. 4(1)  
Seattle Clinic Uses Video For  
Parent-Child Therapy. 4(1)  
Handicapped Learn Via 2-Way  
TV. 4(1)  
Three Video Libraries Show  
Trend in Utilization: Florida,  
N.Y. and Mississippi. 4(2)  
New Parent Education Series  
From HEW. 5(3)  
Instructional TV: Results of the  
First National Study. 5(4)  
New Series for Teachers:  
*Competency Based Curriculum*.  
5(4)  
No Research On School TV.  
6(2)  
Media Educators Take Stand  
On 1st Amendment Rights.  
6(2)  
Libraries & Distribution. 6(3)  
Measuring TV Violence  
Research Methodologies.  
7(1)  
Keeping It In Perspective:  
Educators Use Video  
Modeling for Environmental  
Design. 4(3)



# Televisions Index

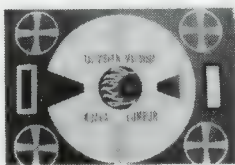
## Technology/Hardware

Basic Video Systems and Some New Developments. 1(3)  
 Citizen Input in Technology Assessment. 2(1)  
 Talmadge Asks OTA To Study Rural Cable. 2(1)  
 NSF Funds 7 Designs of Two-Way Cable. 2(1)  
 ATS Satellite Delivers Health Experiments. 2(2)  
 Portable Video Comes to Broadcast News. 3(1)  
 U.S., Canadian Satellite Will Focus On Education and Health Utilization. 3(1)  
 UNET and The Problem of Distribution. 3(2)  
 Rocky Mountain Satellite — Pork Barrel in the Sky. 3(3)  
 A Primer On Buying Video: Getting What You Need. 3(4)  
 Satellites Defended. 3(4)  
 Should People Fight For Satellites? 4(1)  
 Public Interest Satellite Association. 4(1)  
 HBO Flirts With TV Diversity As Satellite Network Opens. 4(1)  
 Portable Broadcast Gear Creates Intermediate Video Production Level. 4(1)  
 Television Has An All Electronic Future. 4(2)  
 Hardware at the NAB Convention. 4(2)  
 Video-Disc Problems. 4(2)  
 Dear John. 4(2), 5(1)  
 World Radio Policy To Be Set In 1979. 4(2)  
 NBC-NABET Strike: ENG Was the Issue. 4(2)  
 Theory Missed Practice At the Critical Communications Conference. 5(1)  
 Cameras, Digital Technology and One-Inch VTR's: A Report From NAB. 5(2)  
 The Public Push In Satellites and NASA's New Role In R&D. 5(2)  
 The Future of TV: A Slave of the Marketplace, How the Technologists See It. 5(2)

New Sony and Panasonic Editing. 6(1)  
 Videodisc — MCA Discovision. 6(3)  
 PBS Satellite Notes. 6(3)  
 NASA Leaves Indira Gandhi a Propaganda Tool. Goals of Satellite Project are Corrupted. 4(3).

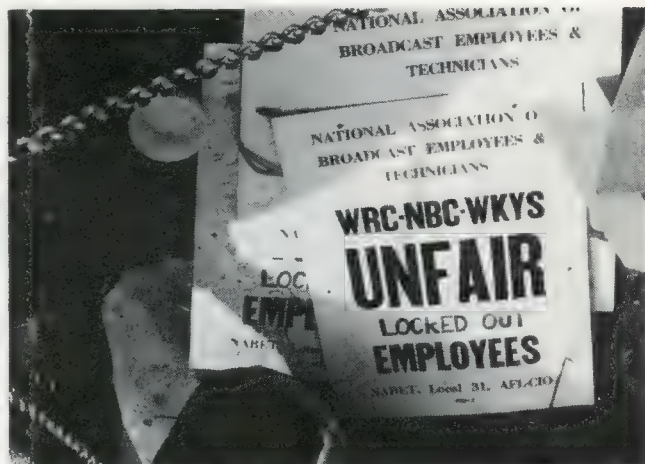
## History

People Don't Remember Radio. 3(2)  
 Everyone Is History: Continuing Appalachian Culture. 3(4)  
 Sitcoms. 4(2)  
 That Old Gang of Mine. 3(3)  
 Philo T. Farnsworth: Inventor of Electronic Television. Part I. 5(1)  
 Philo T. Farnsworth: RCA Battles, Sarnoff, The Philco Years and the Philadelphia Demonstration. Part II. 5(2)  
 Part III. 5(3)  
 Part IV. 5(4)  
 Restoring Philo's Place In History: Challenges To The Corporate Myth. 5(4)  
 Lessons From Carnegie I. 7(1)  
 Archives of TV History. 5(1)



## Cable

Cable TV: Past, Present, Future. 1(2)  
 Action Plan For Cable TV in Washington, D.C. 1(2)  
 Women Organize Around Cable TV. 1(2)  
 Cable TV Action Plan Begun By D.C. City Council. 1(3)  
 Cable TV in Adams-Morgan. 1(4)  
 CATV Hubub in Rockville. 1(4)



Theory and Practice of Community Video. Part II, Access Groups Tell Their Stories: Minneapolis-University Community Video; Memphis-Memphis Womens Channel; Milwaukee- Input Community Video Center; Los Angeles- L.A. Public Access Project. 1(4)  
 Metro Cable Round-up. 1(4)  
 Cable Franchising. 2(1)  
 Cable Independents Program For Local Audiences. 2(1)  
 Sen. Talmadge Asks OTA To Study Rural Cable. 2(1)  
 NSF Funds Seven Designs of Two-Way Cable. 2(1)  
 Metro Cable Update. 2(1)  
 Cable Policy Changing: Deregulation Push, FCC Eliminates Mandatory Origination. 2(1)  
 OTP Cable Bill Rewritten. 2(2)  
 Cable to Teach Mental Health In Wisconsin. 2(2)  
 Women's Cable Channel in Albany, N.Y. 2(2)  
 Cable TV: Pending Issues Before FCC Cable Bureau. 3(1)  
 Access: Better Than Fairness. 3(1)  
 Cable: Vision Out of Focus. 3(2)  
 The Cable TV Movie. 3(2)  
 Pay Cable 3(2)  
 Cable TV: FCC Asks For Comment On Access. 3(2)



# Televisions Index

Canadian Cable. 3(2)  
 National Science Foundation  
 Awards Two-Way Cable  
 Grants. 3(2)  
 HBO Flirts With TV Diversity  
 As Satellite Networks  
 Opens. 4(1)  
 Low Profile For Access NCTA  
 Meeting. 4(1)  
 New FCC Access Rule Will  
 Merge 3 Channels. 4(1)  
 Video/Cable Gains Power in  
 the American Library  
 Association structure. 4(1)  
 Cable TV Used To Serve Aged  
 in Reading PA. 4(1)  
 Nationwide Art Series on  
 Cable Explores New  
 Distribution Concept; Cable  
 Arts Foundation. 4(1)  
 LA Cable Study: Will The City  
 Be Wired? 4(2)  
 Seven Years of Public Access:  
 100 Active Access Centers.  
 5(4)  
 Four Profiles: Reading, PA;  
 Danbury, CT, York, PA.,  
 Marin, CA.  
 The Courts vs. Public Access.  
 The St. Louis Decision. 6(1)  
 National Cable Television  
 Report. 6(2)  
 Artists Television Network:  
 Cable SOHO. 6(2)  
 More on the "Midwest  
 Decision". 6(2)  
 Pay Cable. 6(3)  
 QUBE. 6(3)  
 Rural Cable TV Co-Operative.  
 7(1)  
 House Hearings Become  
 Battleground Over Cable TV.  
 4(3)

## Social Service

Health Communications  
 Towards a Humane Society.  
 1(2)  
 Health Maintenance: Patient  
 Education Moving In the  
 U. S. 1(3)  
 Tele-Health Notes. 1(4)  
 ATS Satellite Delivers Health  
 Experiments. 2(2)  
 Cable To Teach Mental Health  
 In Wisconsin. 2(2)  
 Tele-Health Notes. 2(2), 3(1),  
 3(2), 3(3)  
 U. S. and Canadian Satellite  
 Will Focus on Education  
 and Health Utilization. 3(1)  
 New Public Service Satellite  
 Consortium. 3(1)  
 Cooperation Stressed In Health  
 Media. 3(2)  
 Maine Health Education  
 Center Established. 3(2)  
 Indiana Hospital TV Network  
 is Test Bed For Patient  
 Education. 3(2)  
 CTW Learns How To Better  
 Plan Health Education  
 Series. 3(2)  
 Rocky Mountain Satellite:  
 Pork Barrel In the Sky. 3(3)  
 Government Funds Project For  
 Handicapped. 3(3)  
 Activated Patient Grant. 3(3)  
 Video Teaching: Video  
 Learning. 3(4)  
 Five Years in the Field: 12  
 Contributors Share the  
 Experience. A Look At  
 Video and the Classroom.  
 3(4)  
 Los Angeles Parks Department  
 Uses Video Van. 3(4)  
 Seeing Ourselves to Change  
 Ourselves: Self Image Video  
 Work Teaches Teachers. 3(4)  
 Xenia, Ohio Cable Health  
 Show. 3(4)  
 N.J. Drug Agency Expands  
 Video Use. 3(4)  
 Video Psychiatry and Media  
 Conference. 3(4)



Seattle Clinic Uses Video For  
 Parent-Child Therapy. 4(1)  
 Handicapped Learn Via 2-Way  
 TV. 4(1)  
 Cable TV Used To Serve Aged  
 in Reading, PA. 4(1)  
 Research Video Family Studies  
 Challenges Myths of the  
 60's: Data Affects Nutritional  
 Planning. 4(2)  
 Interview: Robert Choate,  
 Council on Children, Media  
 and Merchandising. 5(1)  
 Busing and Video Process:  
 School Desegregation and  
 Boston Media. 5(1)  
 Video Validity in Social Science  
 Survey Research. 5(2)  
 New Parent Education Series  
 From HEW. 5(3)  
 New Series for Teachers:  
 'Competency Based  
 Curriculum'. 5(4)  
 Media Educators Take Stand  
 on 1st Amendment Rights.  
 6(2)  
 Slow Scan Applications:  
 Health Care For  
 Underserved Areas. 6(2)  
 Broadcast TV Patient  
 Education. 6(2)  
 Banning TV Advertising for  
 Kids: Pro's and No's Muster  
 Forces for Hearings. 6(2)  
 Rural Cable TV Cooperative.  
 7(1)

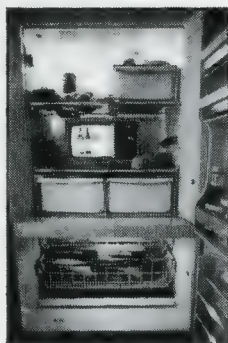


# Televisions Index

## Tape/Program Reviews

WCVC Tapelog. 1(1)  
 Gerald Ford's America. (TVTV) 2(1)  
 Cuba the People. (Downtown Community Television) 2(1)  
 Great Mystery. 2(1)  
 Feeling Good. 3(2)  
 The Adams Family. (WNET, NEH) 3(3)  
 It's a Living. (VIDEOPOLIS) 3(3)  
 Woman Cooking, Woman Spending, But Not Woman Alive. (WNET) 4(1)  
 VTR. (WNET) 4(1)  
 Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman. 4(1)  
 Changing Channels. (University Community Video) 4(2)  
 The Police Tapes. (Alan & Susan Raymond) 5(1)  
 Chinatown. (Downtown Community Television) 5(1)  
 Behavioral Assessment of Hearing Sensitivity in Infants. (Child Development & Mental Retardation Center) 5(1)  
 Good Night, Good Morning. (Joan Jonas) 5(1)  
 Rebo. (WGBH) 5(1)  
 The TVTV Show. 5(2)  
 Giving Birth. (Tobe, J. Carey) 5(2)  
 Giving Birth: Four Portraits. (Julie Gustafson and John Reilly) 5(2)  
 Earth Birth, Sky High. (Dean & Dudley Evenson) 5(2)  
 Henry Miller 84. #1. (John Hunt) 5(3)  
 Windward Avenue Sketches. (John Hunt) 5(3)  
 Kim Study I (John Hunt) 5(3)  
 Structural Realism. (Nancy Holt) 5(4)  
 Speak Out Seattle. 5(4)  
 Let's Make a Deal. 6(1)  
 Making Video Dance: Ballanchine, Cunningham, and Twyla Tharp. 6(1)  
 A Bill Wegman Retrospective. 6(2)  
 Lessons in TV Portraiture: A Review of the Writers in America Series. 6(2)

Health Care: Your Money Or Your Life. (Downtown Community Television) 7(1)



## Print Reviews:

Media Reading List. 1(3)  
 Guide To Media Newsletters. 1(3)  
 Othmer, David. *The Wired Island: The First Two Years of Public Access to Cable TV in Manhattan*. 1(3)  
 Kraskow, Edwin G. and Lawrence Longley. 1(3)  
 The Politics of Broadcast Regulation. 1973. 1(3)  
 LeDuc, Donald R. *Cable TV and the FCC: A Crisis in Media Control*. 1973. 1(3)  
 Gillespie, Gil. *The Apparent Viability of Public Access in North America*. 1973. 1(3)  
 Park, R. E., editor. *The Role Of Analysis In Regulatory Decisionmaking. The Case For Cable Television*. 1(3)  
 Cable In Boston: A Basic Viability Report. 1974. 1(4)  
 Report of the Boston Consumers Council to the Honorable Kevin White on the Development of a Cable Television System. 1973. 1(4)  
 Center for Understanding Media. *Doing The Media*. 1972. 1(4)  
 Cosmic Mechanix Communications Directory. 1973. 1(4)  
 The Bread Game: The Realities of Foundation Fund Raising. 1973. 1(4)  
 Ehrlich, Howard. *Politics of News Media Control*. 1(4)

The Network Project. *Control of Information and Directory of the Networks*. 1(4)

Gitlin, Tod. "Sixteen Notes On Television and The Movement," in *Triquarterly Issue of Literature and Politics*. 1(4)

Jencks, Charles and Nathan Silver. *Adhocism: The Case For Improvisation*. 1973. 1(4)

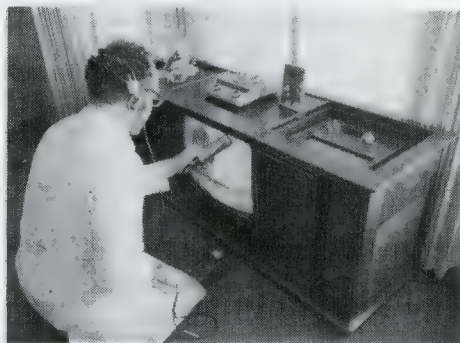
Smith, Ralph Lee. "Community Cable TV: Public Access and Union Fears" from the *Nation*. April 6, 1974. 1(4)

Marsh, Ken. *Independent Video*. 2(2)

Denver Community Center. *A Community Television Production Experience*. 2(2)

Robinson, Richard. *The Video Primer*. 2(2)

The Conference Board. *Information Technology: Some Critical Information for Decision Makers*. 1972. 2(2)



Martin, James. *Future Developments in Telecommunications*. 1971. 2(2)

Park, Ben. *An Introduction to Telemedicine*. 2(2)

Reich, Joel, J. *Telemedicine: The Assessment of an Evolving Health Care Technology*. 2(2)

Schwartz, Tony. *The Responsive Chord*. 1973. 2(2)

Jennings, Ralph M. and Pamela Richard. *How to Protect Your Rights in Television and Radio*. 3(1)

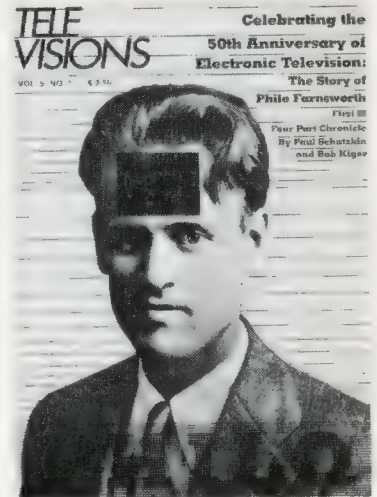
Urban Planning Aid. *The Cable Book: Community Television For Massachusetts*. 1974. 3(1)



# Televisions Index

- Klein, Ted and Ted Danzig.  
*How to Be Heard: Making the Media Work For You.* 1974. 3(1)
- Tuchman, Gaye, editor. *The TV Establishment: Programming For Power and For Profit.* 1974. 3(1)
- NCTA, *Over The Cable.* 1974. 3(1)
- Kalba, Kas. *The Video Implosion: Models for Reinventing Television.* 3(1)
- Sargent, Ralph. *Preserving the Moving Image.* 1974. 3(1)
- Stranshamps, Edith editor. *Rooms With No View: A Woman's Guide to the Man's World of Media.* 1974. 3(1)
- Bartlett, Bud. *By Wave and By Wire: A Look At Public Electronic Media In Illinois.* 1974. 3(1)
- Gillette, Frank. *Paradigms.* 1973. 3(2)
- Sterling, Christopher. *The Media Sourcebook.* 1974. 3(2)
- Nordenstreng, Kaarle editor. *Informational Mass Communications.* 1973. 3(3)
- Littunen, Yrjo et al. *Approaching Mass Media Education Through Communication Research.* 1974. 3(3)
- Public-Cable. *The Cable Handbook.* 3(3)

- Phillips, Kevin P. *Mediacracy: American Parties and Politics in the Communications Age.* 1975. 3(4)
- Seiden, Martin H. *Who Controls the Mass Media? Popular Myths and Economic Realities.* 1974. 3(4)
- Anderson, Chuck. *Video Power: Grass-Roots Television.* 1975. 3(4)
- AIA. *Performance Guidelines for Planning Community Resource Centers.* 1974. 3(4)
- Barnouw, Erik. *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television.* 4(1)
- Grele, Ronald J. editor. *Envelopes of Sound.* 1975. 4(2)
- Schneider, Ira and Beryl Korot. *Video Art: An Anthology.* 1976. 4(2)
- Read, William H. *America's Mass Media Merchants.* 1976. 6(1)
- Schiller, Herbert I. *Communication and Cultural Domination.* 1976. 6(1)
- Tunstall, Jeremy. *The Media Are American: Anglo-American Media in the World.* 1977. 6(1)
- Mander, Jerry. *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television.* 1977. 6(1)
- Coleman, Howard editor. *Case Studies in Broadcast Management.* 6(2)
- Dessart, George. *Television in the Real World: A Case Study Course in Broadcast Management.* 6(2)
- Sterling, Christopher. *A Distribution Bibliography.* 6(3)
- Cole, Barry and Mal Oettinger. *Reluctant Regulators: The FCC and the Broadcast Audience.* 7(1)
- Mankiewicz, Frank and Joe Swerdlow. *Remote Control: Television and the Manipulation of American Lives.* 7(1)

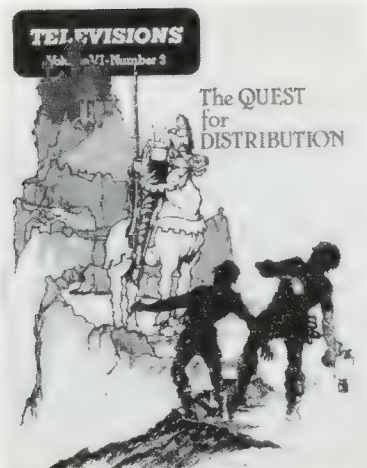


## Televisions Volume 7(1)

- Measuring TV Violence  
Research Methodologies  
Programs on the Visual Arts  
Rural Cable TV Cooperative  
Chroma Key  
Community Media  
*Reluctant Regulators: The FCC and The Broadcast Audience.* by Barry Cole and Mal Oettinger.  
Public TV Minority Training Grants  
Lessons From Carnegie I  
*Health Care, Your Money or Your Life,* Review

## Televisions Volume 6(4)

- Independent Producers in Public TV.  
(A Study for the Carnegie II Commission)





# Televisions Index

## Televisions Volume 6(3)

Distribution Issue  
VideoDisc-MCA DiscoVision  
Pay Cable  
QUBE  
Minority Cable  
Self Distribution: Three Case Studies.

Downtown Community Television  
Alan Hertzberg, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane DuBois*  
John Hunt, Environmental Communications

Copyright  
PBS Satellite Notes  
Libraries & Distribution  
Galleries, Museums & Media Centers  
A Distribution Bibliography

## Televisions Volume 6(2)

No Research On School TV.  
New Access to Regional Editing Centers: Syracuse, San Francisco, Chicago, and Missoula.

National Cable Television Report.

Interview: Jon Alpert, Downtown Community Television.

Artists Television Network: Cable SOHO.

More on the "Midwest Decision"

Media Educators Take Stand On First Amendment Rights  
Public Affairs National Feed.

*Remote Control: Television and The Manipulation of American Life* by Frank Mankiewicz and Joe Swerdlow.

CETA Staffs Video Groups Across the Country: Background and Five Profiles.

Seventeen Productions Funded by NEA's Media Arts.

A Bill Wegman Retrospective: Tests, Collisions and Affinities.

Banning TV Advertising for Kids: Pro's and No's Muster Forces for Hearings.

NTIA Replaces OTP and OT. *Case Studies in Broadcast Management.* Edited by

Howard Coleman.

*Television In the Real World—A Case Study Course in Broadcast Management.* by George Dessart.

Slow Scan Applications: Health Care for Underserved Areas.

Broadcast TV Patient Education.

Lessons in TV Portraiture. A Review of *The Writers in America Series*.

What the Hell Does An Art Director have to Do With Information Programming? Communications Rewrite 1978.

## Televisions Volume 6(1)

DC's WETA Serving the Public?

The Courts vs. Public Access. The St. Louis Decision.

*America's Mass Media Merchants.* 1976. by William H. Read.

*Communication and Cultural Domination.* 1976. by Herbert I. Schiller

*The Media Are American: Anglo-American Media In the World.* 1977. by Jeremy Tunstall.

*Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television.* 1977. by Jerry Mander.

*Let's Make a Deal: A Film Portrait of the Biggest Game Show in TV. History.*

Squat

First Class License in 14 Days for \$395.

Summer Conferences.

Fund Winners

Projects

New Sony and Panasonic Editing.

Satellite Video Exchange: Vancouver Group Still Committed to Alternative TV. Five Years of Production/Education.

Canadian Broadcasting: Other Models. Fighting Americanization of the Airwaves.

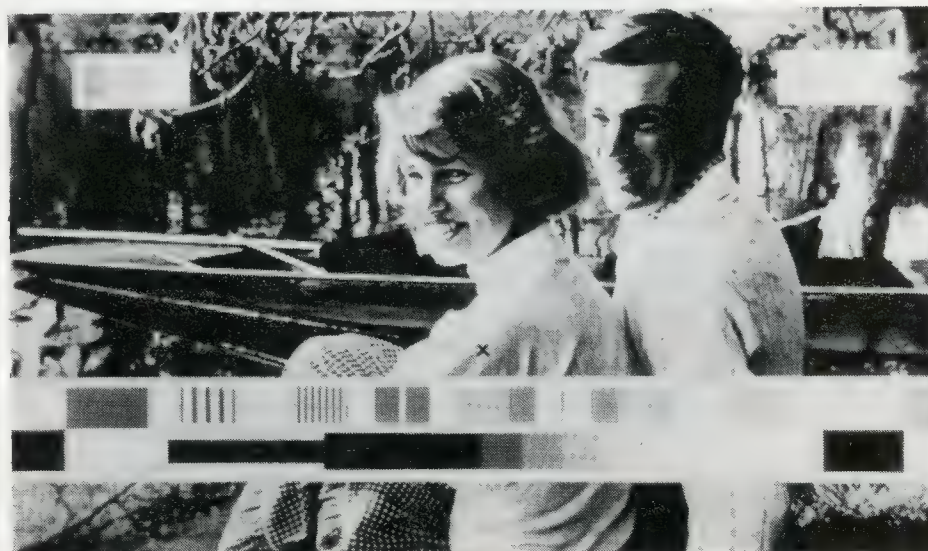
CPB Appropriations Bill Promises Extensive Changes for Public TV.

Interview: Carol Brandenburg and David Loxton, WNET

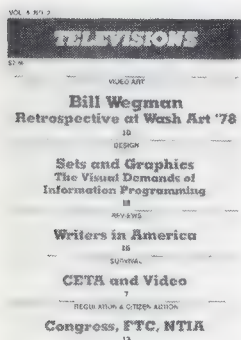
Interview: Ed Kuhlman, Citizens Communications Cntr.

Acting Techniques in the Nightly News: Creating an Ethos.

Making Video Dance: Ballanchine, Cunningham, and Twyla Tharp.







## Televisions Volume 5(4)

526th Line  
Instructional TV: Results of  
First National Study  
Video Art: Spain and Syracuse,  
N.Y.  
New Series for Teachers:  
*Competency Based Curriculum*  
*How To Read A Film*. 1977 by  
James Monaco  
*Cultural Correspondence*  
*The Video Guide*. 1977. by  
Charles Bensinger.  
Reviews: *Speak Out Seattle*  
*Structural Realism*  
Part IV: Philo T. Farnsworth  
*Marketing Live From Lincoln*  
*Center*  
Seven Years of Public Access:  
100 Active Access Centers.  
Four Profiles: Reading, PA.;  
Danbury, CT., York, PA.,  
Marin, Ca.  
Restoring Philo's Place in  
History: Challenges to the  
Corporate Myth.

## Televisions Volume 5(3)

Video Portraits by John Hunt.  
*Henry Miller 84. #1*  
*Winward Avenue Sketches*  
*Kim Study I*  
Interview: Michael Arlen  
Projects  
Software  
WNET Wins Ford/NEA  
Independent Documentary  
Fund  
*The Plug-In Drug*. 1977 by  
Marie Winn  
Print  
Lessons in Viewer Sponsored  
TV. Studying Ten-years of  
LA's Late KVST-68.  
Battles of Alternative  
Broadcasters  
New Parent Education Series  
From HEW  
Part III: Philo T. Farnsworth  
*The Quality of Television*  
Acting: Confessions of an  
Acting Coach.

## Televisions Volume 5(2)

Cameras, Digital Technology  
and one-Inch VTRS. A  
Report From NAB.  
Software  
*The TVTV Show*: Behind the  
Scenes and Between the  
Lines  
A Midwife's View of 3 Tapes  
on Childbirth: *Giving Birth*;  
*Giving Birth: Four Portraits*;  
*Earth Birth, Sky High*  
Print Resources  
Survival  
Projects  
Video Validity in Social Science  
Survey Research  
The Public Push in Satellites  
and NASA's New Role in  
R&D  
*Spots: The Popular Art of*  
*American Television*  
*Commercials*.  
Interview: Bruce Kurtz  
Interview: Chloe Aaron  
The Future of TV: A Slave of  
the Market Place. How the  
Technologists See it.  
Part II: Philo Farnsworth, TV's  
Inventor: RCA Battles,  
Sarnoff, the Philco Years,  
and the Philadelphia  
Demonstration.

## Televisions Volume 5(1)

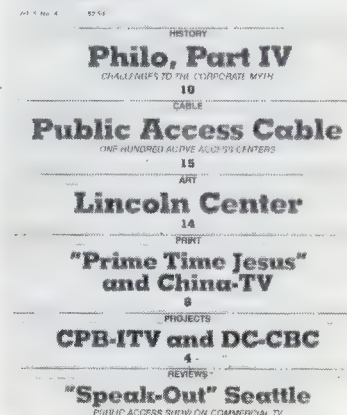
The True Story of an Editorial  
Reply ...  
Theory Missed Practice at the  
Critical Communications  
Conference.  
Philo T. Farnsworth: Inventor  
of Electronic Television. First  
In a 4-part Chronicle.  
Video Art: The Sao Paulo  
Biennial International  
Exhibitions and U.S. Video  
Art.  
Coast to Coast Taping With  
Independent Truckers.  
Production Notes for *On the*  
*Boulevard*  
Interview: Robert Choate,  
Council On Children, Media  
and Merchandising. Can Mr.  
Machine Save Kids From  
Count Chocula?

Busing and Video Process:  
School Desegregation and  
Boston Media.  
Reviews: *The Police Tapes*;  
*Chinatown*; *Behavioral*  
*Assessment of Hearing*  
*Sensitivity in Infants*; *Good*  
*Night, Good Morning*; *May*  
*Windows*; *ReBop*  
Survival  
Documentary Funding  
Friday Night Documentaries  
Progress Report: Video Projects  
Archives of TV History  
Software  
Two New Series Focus on  
Families  
Dear John

## Televisions Volume 4(3)

No Boring Spectacles: TV on a  
Human Scale. Independent  
Videomakers Cover Election  
'76.  
NASA Leaves Indira Gandhi A  
Propaganda Tool. Goals of  
Satellite Experiment are  
Corrupted.  
PBS News Planners Reinvent  
the Wheel.  
House Hearings Become  
Battleground Over Cable TV.  
Interview: Erik Barnouw  
"Monopolies, Sponsorship  
and New Technologies."  
Keeping it in Perspective:  
Educators Use Video  
Modeling for Environmental  
Design.

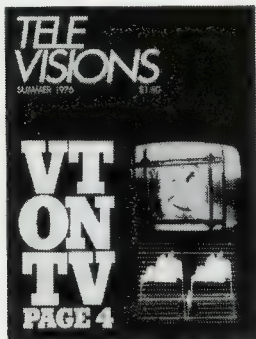
## TELEVISIONS





# Televisions Index

## Televisions Volume 4(2) VT ON TV



Small Format Video Broadcast  
VT On TV Question: Small Format is sweeping the TV industry at a time when many independent video producers are trying to break into broadcasting. Are the two trends mutually exclusive, and what do you think the result will be on our home TV sets in the next few years?

VT on TV/Time Scan  
Television has an All Electronic Future.

Sitcoms

Hardware at the NAB Convention.

Video-Disc Problems

Dear John

National Science Foundation  
Anti-Public: Interest in Science for Citizens Program; Public TV up for Ascertainment; License Challenges.

Pisa Surveys 1500 Groups on Satellites

Video Production

New 1/2" Programs Set Public TV Precedents. Godard Mixes Film, Video

Taping Sacred Ants

VTR Airs 13 New Shows By Independents and Packages Past Series.

Living Video

Copyright Revision Spells Change for Artists, Broadcasters, CATV.

World Radio Policy to Be Set in 1979.

LA Cable Study: Will the City Be Wired

Video Workers: Unions and New Organizations

Leased Access: Channel J. Broadcasting: Alternative to the Distribution Problem. Lessons From Alternative Radio.

NBC-NABET Strike: ENG Was the Issue.

*Changing Channels*

FCC to Act On Jersey's Lack of VHF Station

Cataloging Video: A Seminar on Frustration.

Three Video Libraries Show Trends in Utilization: Florida, N.Y., and Mississippi.

Does Target Programming Serve Minorities? U.S.O.E., ESSA-TV, CTW, CPB?

Research Video Family Studies Challenge Myths of the 60's: Data Affects Nutritional Planning.

Video Performance in San Francisco

NEA-CPB Artists at Public-TV Stations Chosen.

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*Video Art: An Anthology.* 1976. by Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot.

NEA Revamps Public Media Grants Process.

Video Funding in New Orleans.

## Televisions Volume 4(1)

Court Video vs. The Poor. 526th Line

Should People Fight for Satellites?

Public Interest Satellite Association (PISA).

Public Service Announcements (PSAs)

Free Speech Messages. (FSM's) Woman Cooking, Woman Spending, But Not *Woman Alive.*

D.C. Group Wins WMAL Transfer Challenge.

Children's TV Studies Report: Violence, Sex Roles and Sugar Ads.

HBO Flirts With TV Diversity As Satellite Network Opens.

Low Profile for Access at NCTA Meeting.

New FCC Access Rule Will Merge 3 Channels.

The Heartbreak of X-Radiation.

Women's Task Force Indicts CPB Record On Hiring & Programming.

Citizens Group Seeks More TV Public Affairs Programming.

National Science Foundation Stalls on *Science for Citizens.*

Video Technology/Live Performance.

WNET's VTR

Videomaker Review

Video Festivals

*Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*

Portable Broadcast Gear Creates Intermediate Video Production Level.

Hardware Information Network.

Broadcast Schools Train Too Many Students for the Wrong Jobs.

CPB Education Office

Video/Cable Gains Power In New American Library Association Structure.

Seattle Clinic Uses Video For Parent-Child Therapy.

Handicapped Learn Via 2-Way TV.

Cable TV Used To Serve Aged in Reading, PA.

Nationwide Art Series on Cable Explores New

Distribution Concept: Cable Arts Foundation.

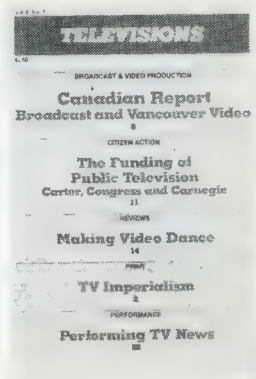
San Francisco Museum Learns How to Show Video

Art-Shorts

Survival

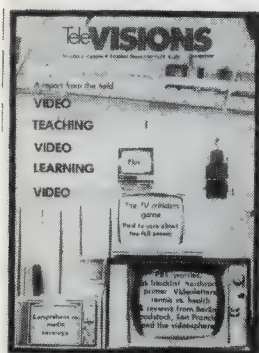
New York Arts Council Budget Makes New York State Media Mecca.

*Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television.* by Erik Barnouw.





# Televisions Index



## Televisions Volume 3(4)

Video Teaching: Learning Video Five Years In the Field: 12 Contributors Share the Experience.  
Cyclops: Man With One Eye In the Land of the Blind.  
The ABC's of TV Criticism.  
A Look At Video and the Classroom.  
Media Awareness: What's Not In The Picture.  
Learning To Show As Well As Make Video.  
Kids Don't Like Pointless Games: Creative Video Uses.  
Six Years of Workshops at New York's Global Village  
Real-Life Soap Opera Kids Produce Themselves. Details of an Intimate Production.  
Los Angeles Parks Department Uses Video Van.  
Everyone is History:  
Continuing Appalachian Culture.  
Video PenPals.  
Seeing Ourselves to Change Ourselves. Self Image Video Work Teaches Teachers.  
526th Line  
VideoArts. One-Woman Effort Puts Video in San Francisco Arts Festival.  
International Video Arrives in Berlin  
Woodstock Community Video Art Shorts.  
Video and Programming  
San Jose Community Media Center.  
Public Television Library.  
PBS Worries Over Corporate Underwriters.  
Hardware  
A Primer on Buying Video.  
Getting What You Need.  
Health and Social Services  
Xenia Ohio Cable Health Show.  
N.J. Drug Agency Expands Video Use.  
Video Psychiatry & Media Conference.  
Satellites Defended.

San Francisco Task Force Challenges FCC to Check VIACOM  
Libraries & Education  
CPB Moves In Education Role.  
California Video Resources Project.  
Women's Media  
Nine Cities Share VideoLetters.  
Survival  
Tape Exchange  
New Grants in N.Y.  
Media Workers Tortured in Chile.  
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The Programming Structure of Public Broadcasting.  
Exploring the Public Air.  
"Mr. Mason, You're Overruled". Video Catches Up With The Law.  
That Old Gang of Mine.  
Ideas Don't Fall From the Sky.  
Documentary Acting.  
Seven Years of Video Documentaries.  
Video In Museums.  
Video Art: John Baldessari, Joan Logue  
Southland Video Anthology: LA Breeds Television.

The Touble With PBS is...  
Getting Into PBS —  
Independents Make Inroads On National Programming.  
The Station Program Co-Op. Video & Programming.  
The Adams Family Comes Alive  
*It's A Living*  
Libraries & Education: ALA's Cable/Video Section  
Broadcast Regulation.  
FCC Passes Policy On Citizen Agreement.  
Public Interest  
Communications Law Firms: The Media Access Project, Citizens Communications Center.  
Cable TV: FCC Asks for Comment On Access  
Canadian Cable  
NSF Awards Two-Way Cable Grants.  
Technology: Rocky Mountain Satellite — Pork Barrel in the Sky.  
Tele-Health  
Government Funds Projects For Handicapped Activated Patient Grant  
Survival  
Resource Tools For Fundraising Efforts  
Television Grants  
U. S. Passes \$2 Billion — New CETA Money.  
Print Resources  
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# Televisions Index

## Television Volume 3(2)

Video in Russia  
 Bringing the Museum Home.  
 Video in Museums  
 Video Arts  
 A National Advertising Policy:  
 Economic Reform & The  
 Media.  
 Access: Better Than Fairness.  
 Profile: The Wiley Year.  
 Cable: Vision Out of Focus.  
 The Cable TV Movie  
 Pay Cable.  
 The Heartache of Half/Inch  
 Cablecasting.  
 Own a Broadcast TV Station.  
 Tele-Health Notes  
 Cooperation Stressed in Health  
 Media.  
 Maine Health Education  
 Center Established.  
 Dial-A-Health Programs  
 Spreads to 35 U.S. Cities.  
 Indian Hospital TV Network is  
 Test Bed for Patient  
 Education.  
 Revamped *Feeling Good* returns  
 to PBS.  
 CTW Learns How to Better  
 Plan Health Education  
 Series.  
 National Health Education  
 Center.  
 Women's Media — New York  
 Women's Video Festival  
 Runs for Three Weeks.  
 The Context of Video.  
 Video & Programming  
 Portland, Oregon Project  
 Focuses On Neighborhood.  
 San Jose Access.  
 Libraries & Education  
 Mobile Library's Media  
 Program.  
 UNET and the Problem of  
 Distribution  
 Coalition of Unions to Lobby  
 for Jobs.  
 People Don't Remember Radio  
 Ideas Don't Fall From the Sky.  
 Collision at \$1600 a minute.  
 Broadcast Access:  
 Congressional Media Round  
 up. NSF Funds Study On  
 Blacks & TV.  
*Paradigms* by Frank Gillette.  
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 Christopher Sterling. 1974.

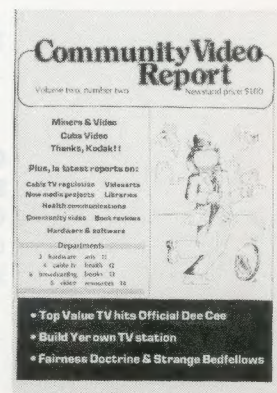
## Televisions Volume 3(1)

Media in the Coming  
 Depression  
 Video in Museums: Gadgets  
 or Imagery? Jacques  
 Lipchitz Talks Back from the  
 Screen.  
 The Medium of Television  
 Explorations in Video Arts.  
 Portable Video Comes to  
 Broadcast News.  
 Tele-Health Notes.  
 Technology: U.S. and  
 Canadian Satellite Will  
 Focus on Education, Health  
 Utilization.  
 New Public Service Satellite  
 Consortium.  
 Libraries & Education.  
 Women's Media: Feminist  
 Media Conferences.  
 Women's Cable Channel In  
 Albany, New York.  
 Interview: Donna Allen, "The  
 Economy, Politics and the  
 Media".  
 Ideas Don't Fall From the Sky  
 "They All Learn to Use the  
 Telephone"  
 Broadcast Access: Historic PTV  
 License Decision in  
 Alabama. *How to Protect Your  
 Rights in Television & Radio.* by  
 Ralph M. Jennings and  
 Pamela Richard.  
 National Black Media  
 Coalition.  
 Video & Programming — PBS  
 Enters Video Marketing.  
 Cable TV — Pending Issues  
 Before FCC Cable Bureau.  
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 Television for Massachusetts.*  
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 Resources  
 Conferences  
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 Media Work for You.* 1974. by  
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 Profit.* 1974. Edited by Gaye  
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 Guide to the Man's World of  
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 Stranshamps.  
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 Public Electronic Media in  
 Illinois.* 1974. By Bud  
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Theory and Practice of  
 Community TV, Part III.  
 TVTV — *Gerald Ford's America.*  
 Cable Policy Changing:  
 Deregulation Push, FCC  
 Eliminates Mandatory  
 Origination.  
 OTP Cable Bill Rewritten  
*Cuba the People*  
*Independent Video.* by Ken  
 Marsh.  
*A Community Television  
 Production Experience.* by The  
 Denver Community Center.  
*The Video Primer.* by Richard  
 Robinson.  
*Great Mystery*  
 Video Project Helps U.S./Welsh  
 Miners  
 Kodak Advice an Insult to  
 Workers.  
 Long Beach Plan Will Tie  
 Museum, Video and Cable  
 TV.  
 Florence Video Group Opens  
 1st U.S. Video Show  
 ATS Satellite Delivers Health  
 Experiments.  
 Cable to Teach Mental Health  
 in Wisconsin.  
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 Critical Information for Decision  
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 Telecommunications.* 1971. by  
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 by Ben Park.





# Televisions Index

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 Women's Media.  
 Library Notes.  
 Media Resources

## Community Video Report Volume 2(1)

Cable Franchising.  
 Local D. C. Group Fights WMAL Sale  
 Interview: Clay Whitehead, Office of Telecommunications Policy.  
 Alaska's Sky River Project: Community Use of Video and Film.  
 FCC Weighing Access and Origination Regulations.  
 Cable Independents Program for Local Audiences.  
 Experimental Television Center Explores Video as Art in Binghamton.  
 Newest Public Interest Campaign — Citizen Input in Technology Assessment.  
 Talmadge Asks OTA to Study Rural Cable  
 National Science Foundation Funds 7 Designs of 2-way Cable.  
 Jerome Barron Fights to Open 1st Amendment.  
 WCVC Report  
 Metro Cable Update: Howard County, Montgomery County, Arlington Cable, Baltimore Cable, Rockville Cable.  
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## Community Video Report Volume 1(4)

Cable TV in Adams Morgan.  
 CATV Hubub, Rockville  
 Interview: Richard Wiley, FCC Chairman; Tim Ohara, Theta-Com, Inc. A Discussion of Cable Technology.

Community Newstapes:  
 Antidote to TV News.  
 WCVC Tape Log: An Annotated Listing of New Additions.  
 Video Improvisation/Video Performance.  
 WCVC Summer Video Training Workshops.  
 Tele-Health Notes  
 Interview: Theodore Ledbetter, Urban Communications Group.  
 Theory and Practice of Community Video Part II.  
 Access Groups tell Their Stories: Minneapolis — University Community Video; Memphis — Memphis Women's Channel; Milwaukee-Input/Community Video Center; Los Angeles — LA Public Access Project.  
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Cable Television Action Plan Begun By D. C. City Council.  
 D. C. Video Coalition Set for Home Rule Tapes.  
 Theory and Practice of Community Video, Part I.  
 Health Maintenance, Patient Education Moving in U. S.  
 Basic Video Systems and Some New Developments.  
 Guide to Media Newsletters  
 Media Reading List  
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Cable TV: Past, Present, Future.  
 TV Surveillance/Washington, D. C.  
 Health Communications — Towards a Humane Society.  
 Action Plan for Cable TV in Washington D. C.  
 Women Organize Around Cable TV.

## Community Video Report Volume 1(1)

Neighborhood Television  
 Community Monitors Government  
 Survival Information Project  
 Broadcast access:  
 Accountability and Housing  
 Washington Community Video Center Tapelog









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